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Lenten Sermons,

PREACHED ON THE

EVENING OF EACH WEDNESDAY AND FRIDAY
DURING THE SEASON OF LENT, 1858,

IN THE

Churches of

ST. MARY-THE-VIRGIN, ST. GILES,
AND ST. EBBE, OXFORD.

WITH A PREFACE

BY

SAMUEL, LORD BISHOP OF OXFORD.



OXFORD,

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PREFACE.

IN prefacing with a few words of introduction a second volume of Lent Sermons preached at Oxford, I have little more to say than that again I most heartily thank God for the amount of apparent good which He has been pleased to vouchsafe to this effort to spread His truth. The large size and the devout behaviour of the congregations which have gathered at Oxford through this Lent, is far from being the only, I may perhaps say the chief, outward manifestation of that blessing. I earnestly pray God to grant that the further circulation of these pages may, through His grace, produce still further blessings to many hearts.

In these pages, the various phases of true and false repentance, as they are set before us in Scripture in several leading examples of each, are fixed and enforced by ministers of God's Word, of various gifts and shades of character. They will, I think, afford to all the means of furnishing themselves, in one

volume, with a very complete exposition, by way of example, of the great subject of true Christian repentance.

Once more I say, in sending forth this volume, may God Almighty, for the sake of Jesus Christ our Lord, bless its influence on His Church.

S. OXON.

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SERMON I.

THE REPENTANCE OF DAVID.

BY

**SAMUEL, LORD BISHOP OF OXFORD,
CHANCELLOR OF THE MOST NOBLE ORDER OF THE GARTER, AND LORD
HIGH ALMONER TO THE QUEEN.**

THE REPENTANCE OF DAVID.

A SERMON,

PREACHED IN

THE CHURCH OF ST. MARY-THE-VIRGIN,
OXFORD,

ON

ASH-WEDNESDAY, 1858,

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Lenten Sermons.

No. 1.



A SERMON,

&c.

Ps. li. 2.

“Wash me thoroughly from my wickedness, and cleanse me from my sin.”

WE have come again, my brethren, to the forty days of Lent; to that season in which the Church of Christ fulfils her Lord's prediction of what she should do “when the bridegroom should be taken away from” her. We have come to the season when we are called upon, each one to “search and try our ways, and turn again unto the Lord.” Most blessed and profitable in their issue are such days as these, when used with faithfulness. Then they become appeals to our God against our sins; cryings for deliverance from them, yea, and receivings from Him, The Cleanser of His people, of His gifts of cleansing. They are days, the fruit of which may be traced through a life; which bring balm in their blessed effects into the agony of the death-struggle, which reach on into the next world, carrying the brightness of a soul which God has washed into the terrors of the last judgment, and beneath the awful shadows of the great white throne. Who can tell, beloved in Christ, what blessings may not be in store for some of you, through the words you shall hear and the prayers you may offer up this very Lent. It may be that God has reserved till now those gifts of grace, through which He may convert the heart of one, and raise another out of some deadly fall, and deliver another out of some careless habit of living which must lead to his destruc-

tion, and confirm another in his Christian course. We know that He does work these miracles of His grace through the weakness of our preaching. We know that this setting forth of His Word, to be brought home to the hearts of the listeners by His mighty grace, according to the sovereign working of His blessed will, is, and has been ever since St. Peter preached at Pentecost, by far the commonest means by which He does draw souls to conversion and to life. We know not whom He may mean thus to save by our preaching this very Lent, but we doubt not that there are many who shall owe much, yea, it may be all, yea, their very selves, to it; and so, first of all, we beseech you, pray, pray earnestly for us and with us, pray at your own homes; pray daily before these services, and after them, pray that God by His grace would through these sermons convert many, arouse many, confirm many, yea, save many to the glory of the beloved Name of our only Lord. Yea, my brethren, pray for this now and here, in a moment's secret supplication, before we enter on our subject.

The special subjects of these sermons, as you may observe, are the lessons taught us in certain leading characters of the Old and New Testament as to repentance—true and false, convictions stifled and ending in destruction and despair, convictions yielded to and becoming instruments of salvation. On these subjects I entreat you to ponder at some fixed and definite times throughout these weeks. To these sermons which are to be preached upon them, I beseech you not only to come yourselves, but also to try to lead your brethren. Let each one resolve, God helping him, to draw, this very Lent, some one at least of those around him to Christ and salvation. Let each use, in this blessed endeavour, the instruments here put into his hands.

Take example, beloved, from the servants of sin and Satan, and be as active and determined for that dear Lord who has

given Himself for you, as they are for the service of their evil master. What will not they do to draw another into their own course of sin? How will they suggest, entice, and draw him on; how will they paint before his imagination the pleasures of sin; how unresting will they be till they have persuaded him to taste them; how will they help him to drown conviction; how will they coax, and flatter, and banter, and dress out that life of evil which they call pleasure! Learn, I say, from them. Help some soul of thy companions or thy friends. It is not half so sweet, if you will only make the experiment, to sin in company, as to be saved in company—to give yourselves together to the evil one, as together to serve that blessed Lord whose service is indeed perfect freedom. Then find thy brother, and bring him with thee to Christ; draw some of your fellows to attend these sermons regularly, draw them on to pray over them afterwards: and know, O man, that if but one be turned through thy labours from his life of sin, thou shalt have saved a soul from death, and won a new jewel for thy Lord's crown; one, too, to call thee blessed, and to be thy joy in that coming hour of the Judge's appearing.

The subject I am to consider with you to-night is the repentance of that signal pattern of true penitence, King David. At the facts involved in this subject I need only glance. Which of us knows not the history of his shameful fall; the long deadness of soul into which it brought him; the great mercy vouchsafed to him in the sending to him of Nathan the prophet, and in the gifts of renewing grace, which with the sound of the prophet's message fell like dew upon his soul, and woke him up to that true, deep, and godly repentance, some of the distinctive marks of which I will proceed to consider with you?

First, then, amongst these, as bearing on what I have said already, let me beg you to notice (I.) the means which won

him to it. It was the preacher's voice. For months he had gone on with this great sin, unconfessed, unrepented of, lying upon his soul, palsying its very life, threatening its eternal death:—who can measure the coldness, the hardness, yea, the misery, of those months of estrangement from God! what must his attendance in God's house have been to him throughout those terrible weeks! How must every Psalm which had been the true voice of his earlier piety, have been now a serpent's tooth gnawing his unrepentant soul! How wretched, how fearful, how nigh unto reprobation, was his state! And now he breaks down like the snow-wreath when the sun looks full upon it, beneath the prophet's voice. "Thou art the man" is God's arrow of conviction striking straight into his heart.

Ah! beloved in Christ, is there no one here to-night who needs a like awakening? Is there no one here who knows that this case is his; that he, too, has lain for months, for years, it may be, under such a burden as this, dead in trespasses and sins? Oh, then, be like him now in his awakening: cry, thou sleeper—cry unto thy God—that this Word of His may pierce thy heart and awaken thee, too, unto contrition.

And then, next, when he has thus broken down under the Word of God, notice (II.) the signs which mark his sincerity: and of these, first, this, (*a.*) that the one master-thought which fills his soul is, "I have sinned against the Lord." This is the first outburst of his stricken soul under the prophet's word. This comes out again and again in that 51st Psalm, in which God has given us at once the spiritual anatomy of David's heart, and at the same time the true history of deep repentance, to be the instruction of His Church in all ages. Mark, then, well this first feature of the case. Hear and ponder on that cry, "I have sinned against the Lord." For though, if ever any sin had been committed against man as

well as God, this undoubtedly was it,—though David had sinned against his faithful liegeman Uriah, against his own family, against his people, against his accomplice in guilt, against Joab, against all,—yet so much greater, so much more awful, so much more terrible was the aspect of his sin as committed against his God, that for the time, at least, it filled up the whole field of his view, and seeing that, he could see nothing else; and falling down before the Holy One with the bitter consciousness of pollution, casting himself before Him from whom he had received all things, even the loyalty of his people, and the love of his friends, and blessings of his family—before Him who had been in days of old closer to him than a brother, the chiefest amongst ten thousand, the one stay of his soul in adversity, the one support of his spirit in extremity,—he groans forth from that broken heart his cry of self-abhorrence, “Against Thee only have I sinned, and done this evil in Thy sight.”

And so, as the next sign, (*b.*) observe that in seeing his sin as committed against God, he sees it in all its hugeness and vileness. There is no diminishing or excusing it, no paring it down. There is no thought or suggestion of the many palliations which the manners, customs, and allowances of his station in that day might easily have discovered, even for such crimes as his. But no! there is not the shadow of such an attempt. There his sin is, as sin—in its vastness, in its utter pollution; the light of God’s countenance falling full upon it, and manifesting all its hideousness. “My sin is ever before me,” is his cry: look where I will, I see it; earth is full of it: every voice I hear, every voice I utter, upbraid me with it. If I look into my family it is there, polluting it; if I look to past prayers and joys, it is there, turning them into greater shame and deeper provocations of Thy goodness than others could ever have incurred or committed; if I look to heaven, it is there witnessing against me, spread like

some scroll of fire and blackness upon the firmament above me, and shutting out from my darkened spirit the light of Thy countenance. And so he dwells upon its foulness. Though it has never broken out before, it has been always there. "Behold, I was shapen in iniquity, and in sin hath my mother conceived me." In the depth of his contrition, he wraps the garment of shame around his whole life, in its every act and along all its course. And then from this follows yet another mark of true repentance, (c.) he takes willingly the disgrace of his sin. There is no covering of it up from men—no notion of a secret, inward repentance, which God shall know, but which the robes of his royalty should hide from man. No; God knew it—that was his burden; it was a light thing that man should know it too: the intensity of his shame, as he looked upon his sin, in God's sight, made man's estimate of it a slight and inconsiderable thing. He was antedating the apostle's declaration—"But with me it is a very small thing to be judged of you, or of man's judgment . . . He that judgeth me is the Lord." There was no whisper here, like that of Saul in the hour of his seeming contrition,—"Yet honour me now before the elders of my people, and before Israel^a:" "Turn Thy face from my sins" was the agonizing supplication of David; his very soul cried out aloud, and instead of shrinking from his shame, he proclaimed it. Though an Eastern king upon a throne of absolute power, he weeps forth before all his people and before all time, "Deliver me from bloodguiltiness, O God." He takes his shame and binds it upon him, if haply, thus bearing it, God may take it from him, and purge him with hyssop, and make him indeed clean.

And as he deals with the shame of his sin, so does he also with its punishment. (d.) There is no shrinking from that either. David was manifestly a man of the tenderest feelings and

^a 1 Sam. xv. 30.

the most lively affections. Listen to him, if you would estimate their depth and intensity, when he is asking anxiously of the messenger of victory after the fate of the young man, even the young man Absalom; or go with him to his chamber of mourning when he has learned his end, and hear his even awful voice of lamentation,—“O Absalom, my son, my son; would God that I had died for thee, O Absalom, my son, my son!” and then estimate what that threatened judgment must have been to him, “The sword shall never depart from thy house.” And yet there is not a whisper of complaint; no cry, that “my punishment is greater than I can bear;” no utterance, in the midst of his passionate entreaties, of one deprecation of the coming chastisement. But there is a cry—a cry which reached the heavens; a cry which came out of the very depths of his broken heart; a cry which brought the answer of his God. And what was it? (e.) it was a cry for cleansing: “Purge Thou me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.” This was his master desire,—that he might be cleansed; that the work might be done thoroughly. It was not a little cleansing that he needed: no; he would be whiter than snow; he would have the very deep foundations, the original well-spring of his pollutions purified: “Make me,” he supplicates, “a clean heart, and renew a right spirit within me.” O mark well, I pray you, brethren, this characteristic of his contrition, for it is one of the very utmost importance,—this desire to be cleansed *thoroughly*; this state of soul which will have no league with sin; which will keep no sweet morsel of it—will bear no remaining portion of it—will retain none of its lesser allowances; which, in the fervour of his spirit, will not hear of ever going nigh to it again, which will be cleansed from it altogether and for ever. And then see how he hopes to be thus parted from iniquity. (f.) He turns straight to his God even in this hour of

shame and of rebuke—even when that awful countenance is bent most sternly on him, and with its lightning glance has just broken through the nine months' slumber of his soul, even when the sentence of coming judgment has fallen heavily upon him. Even then, with his whole soul full of the shame of having sinned against the Lord, he yet turns to Him for all he needs; it is, Purge Thou me—wash Thou me;—I promise nothing—I can do nothing;—I cannot find in myself or in any other Thy creature what I need. No; to Thee, to Thee only—to Thee, against Whom I have sinned; to Thee, who art my Judge; to Thee, before Whom my very bones quake; it is to Thee I turn: Thou art the God of my health—Thou shalt open my mouth. And with this turning to God, as his only Deliverer from his sin, there is yet another mark of his sincerity (*g.*) in the way in which he clings to God as his portion. Even though he be yet afar off; though his bones are broken, yet has he even in his terror, his shame, the remembrance of his Father's countenance, and the deep, irresistible, overwhelming longing for its restoration to himself. “Cast me not away,” he sobs forth, “from Thy presence:” that I could not bear. I can lose all else and cling to Thee, but oh! cast me not away from Thy presence, take not Thy Holy Spirit from me. O give me the comfort of Thy help again, and stablish me with Thy free Spirit,—“Make me to hear of joy and gladness.” And then, mingling with this, lastly, (*h.*) there is the devotion of all his after life to God's service. It is one reason for which he longs for his own deliverance, that he may indeed be God's witness to others: “So shall I teach Thy ways unto the wicked: and sinners shall be converted unto Thee.” Thou shalt open my lips, O Lord, and my mouth shall shew forth Thy praise. It is as though he had heard the words of Christ to the too confident apostle, “When thou art converted, strengthen thy brethren.”

Here then, my brethren, are some of the marks of true and godly repentance, as we may see them in this great example of this great penitent. Oh, I pray you, for your souls' sake, pass them not by lightly, but take them as matters for deep, searching self-examination as to the reality of your repentance. Is it so in any real degree with you? You, depend upon it, have on some side or other too certainly the likeness of David's great sin about you: do you know anything of that deep repentance of his through which alone God works the sinner's cure?

Have you ever (I.) trembled under the Word of God? has its sharp edge entered your soul, piercing it through and through, yea, dividing asunder soul and spirit? has it stripped you of all your vain excuses; has it (II.) shewn you your sin (a.) as committed against God, against your Lord, your Maker, your Redeemer, your Sanctifier; and has this shewn you something of its evil and its curse? (b.) has it grown great and terrible in your eyes, as you gazed upon it in its naked reality, yet with all its aggravations, and, above all, as you came to see how God looks upon it; and so, seeing your sin as great and terrible, because committed against God, have you (c.) taken willingly the shame which He may have appointed for you before men as its fitting portion, or have you tried to cheat yourself by confessing it secretly to God, and then denying it openly before man? and have you (d.) dealt so also with its punishment; have you rebelled against that, or bowed your head to it; have you thought it hard that, whilst so many escape, you should have been singled out for punishment; or have you indeed felt that, heavy as it may be, it is less than your deserts, and, instead of fretting under it, has your cry (e.) been for cleansing? have you cared comparatively little for the chastisement, so that only it can be made God's instrument in purging you from the stain of sin which awoke it against you; and have you indeed left it off, in all its de-

grees, accidents, circumstances, lesser instances, pleasant recollections? Do you still linger on the thought of the pleasure with which it was baited, or is it all hateful to you, abominable in your sight as the rottenness of a loathsome carcass; and have you (*f.*) sought to God to cleanse you; have you gone to the Cross of your Lord, to His precious blood, to the working of His Spirit, to Him the Refiner, to Him the Purifier, and there, and from Him, from His purging hand, have you too sought the cleansing that you need; and (*g.*) has the desire of your soul been to Him? Is this what makes pardon, yea, cleansing itself, so desirable in your eyes — that He may be yours and you may be His; that there may be no wall of transgression parting you from Him, no veil of corruption hiding Him from you? And has He heard you, and given you deliverance, and have (*h.*) you magnified His Name, and spoken of Him to others, and brought them, too, to the foot of His Cross, and to the fountain opened for sin and for uncleanness? Yea, have you taught His ways unto the wicked, and through your witness have sinners been converted unto Him?

Oh, beloved in the Lord, search, I beseech you, and try your ways. As I witnessed to some of you, at the beginning of last Lent, in this very church, there is, depend upon it, a vast amount of self-deception everywhere current as to this great matter. Yea, half-repentance abounds: the miserable counterfeit which ruins souls is everywhere abroad, and unless we watch and pray, and search diligently into ourselves, it will befool and destroy us.

Would you then, my brethren, obtain the blessedness of a true and deep repentance, let me give you, before I close, a few simple hints for your practical assistance in this most weighty matter.

And first, (*1.*) pray earnestly to God to give you the gift. It is His gift: it is to be won by prayer. Christ is exalted

to give repentance. It is the work of that "free Spirit" which is His special gift. Until that heavenly dew falls upon thy soul, it will be, it must be, dry, and cold, and bare. Thou canst not work thyself into penitence. But when that gracious shower is poured upon the heart, all is done. Then the voice of the turtle is heard. Then the heart mourns apart. It is like the breaking-up of some mighty northern frost, which has bound the swelling sea fast beneath its iron band, when the western gale has breathed upon it, and the hard, thick-ribbed ice-crust has broken up as a cobweb under the grasp of a giant. And then all is changed: on the ocean's breast the mighty currents wake again into life, bearing on and on to the frozen north the life-giving streams of southern waters; and as the warm gales breathe on the snowy plains of the neighbouring shore, the long-banished verdure flashes again into colour and beauty, and the sweet spring comes on apace, the birds begin their songs, the fountains awake; and every blade and leaf, with all the tribes of life around them, rejoice before God in the blessed sunlight. And yet what is all this to the breaking-up of the ice-crust which has bound down a living soul, for which Christ died! Oh, weigh well its unspeakable value. See how all the irrational creation weighs light in the balance against its unspeakable worth, and think what must be the blessedness of the true breaking-up, by the breath of God, of the fetters of that spirit's coldness!

Oh, then, mark this first. Pray for that breath of God; seek from Him the gift of the Spirit; wait for His grace; cry to Him, as thou art, cold, and dry, and impenitent—cry unto Him for the awakening, convincing, softening, converting, renewing Spirit; for contrition and penitence; for the opened eye, and the feeling heart, and the gift of tears, and the blessing of self-abasement. Cry, and thou shalt be heard; call, and He shall answer thee.

And then next only after this, let me say, (2.) Remember thy sins. There can be no true penitence without this: a mere general, hazy impression that we are all sinners will not do. Thou must know thine own sin, if thou wouldst repent of it; and so take time for self-examination—yea, and spend care and trouble about it. Take, for instance, one or more of God's Commandments, and after prayer for the Spirit's aid, before beginning the work of self-examination, question thyself closely about them. See where, and when, and how thou hast thyself broken them, in thought, in word, and in deed; and dare, and force thyself, to see their aggravation: the love against which they were committed; the restraints thou hadst to break through; the mercies thou spurnedst before thou didst fall; the compunctions, after sinning, thou hast set aside; and go, in this way, through the Commandments, till thou canst see thy sin; stopping often, in the midst, to pray again and again that God, by His Spirit, will shew thee the truth of thy transgressions.

For this is essential not only to the perfectness, but even to the safety, of such a searching into thine heart, that thou shouldest keep ever before thee the thought of what thy sin is in God's sight. For without this, the gazing upon old sins, even to repent of them, is dangerous for such as we are: for we may thus stir amongst the ashes of an old sin until we kindle the flame of a new desire;—and from this the constant sense of what that sin is in God's sight is the true preservative.

And with, once more, (3.) all thy self-examination mingle acts of revenge against thy fault. Force thy sluggish soul into some direct action against thy besetting temptation, whatever it is. This is the apostle's mark, remember, of a real penitence: "For, behold, this selfsame thing that ye sorrowed after a godly sort, what carefulness it wrought in you,

yea, what clearing of yourselves, yea, what indignation, yea, what fear, yea, what vehement desire, yea, what zeal, yea, what revenge^b !”

And once again, (4.) and I had almost said, above all, as thou gazest upon thy sin, gaze yet more earnestly upon the face of that dear Lord who, by His own bitter passion, delivers thee from sin. For this, and this only, can at once melt thy soul in contrition, and soften and cleanse it. The sight of sin, without the sight of His cross, is a polluting and a hardening sight. It may tempt thee back to old indulgence, it may drive thee to the despair of devils and the wilfulness of hell. Think how St. Peter was saved from this, after his deep and deadly fall: “The Lord turned and looked upon Peter;” and in that look was life. The crust was broken up; his heart was melted, and he went out and wept bitterly. Oh, the exceeding sweetness of those bitter tears! what on earth can equal it? And so shall it be with thee, too, when the Lord turns and looks upon thee. That hard heart of thine shall be molten down beneath that look, as the molten iron in the fiery furnace; that dryness, that cold insensibility for which thou mournest, that disregard of sin—all shall go, and the flesh of thy long-leprous soul come again to thee pure and sweet as the flesh of a little child. It was for this, so far as in that old dispensation was possible, that holy David longed. Hear how he cries, even when his crimson sins shew the most clearly before his weeping eyes: “Hide Thy face from my sins; blot out mine iniquities.” “Thou desirest not sacrifice, else would I give it Thee; the sacrifices of God are a broken spirit: a broken and a contrite heart, O God, Thou wilt not despise.” And even as he dwells on the thought of God’s redeeming mercy triumphing over the greatness of his sin, how does the distant sound of returning joy begin, even in his uttermost anguish, to wake upon his listening ear:

^b 2 Cor. vii. 11.

“Restore unto me the joy of Thy salvation ; uphold me with Thy free Spirit ; make me to hear joy and gladness, that the bones which Thou hast broken may rejoice.” And so it may be with thee. No sin is strong enough to hold thee, if thou see at once its hatefulness, and the face of thy Lord, sin’s Conqueror and man’s Deliverer, bent on thee, with the upbraiding of His love. And to whom canst thou go ; who can love thy soul as He can who died for it ? who even in its corruption yearns over it that He may save it ; to whom it was precious enough to be bought by His own blood ! Oh, let this Lenten penitence, and thy many sins, bring thee closer to Him than thou hast ever yet been drawn ; yea, cast thyself down trembling and astonished underneath His Cross ; bring thy fettered soul before Him, as the palsied man was borne of old of four ; and doubt not that to thee, too, in thy day of grace, that same Lord of love and power shall speak with the voice of love thy marvellous enfranchisement,—
“Man, thy sins are forgiven thee ;” “ arise and walk.”

SERMON II.

THE REPENTANCE OF DAVID.

BY

ARTHUR PENRHYN STANLEY, M.A.,

**REGIUS PROFESSOR OF ECCLESIASTICAL HISTORY,
AND CANON OF CANTERBURY.**

THE REPENTANCE OF DAVID.

A SERMON,

PREACHED IN

THE CHURCH OF ST. GILES,

OXFORD,

ON ASH-WEDNESDAY, 1858.

BY

ARTHUR PENRHYN STANLEY, M.A.,

REGIUS PROFESSOR OF ECCLESIASTICAL HISTORY, AND
CANON OF CANTERBURY.

OXFORD,

AND 377, STRAND, LONDON:

JOHN HENRY AND JAMES PARKER.

M DCCC LVIII.



A SERMON,

&c.

2 SAM. xii. 7, 13.

“And Nathan said unto David, ‘Thou art the man.’ . . . And David said unto Nathan, ‘I have sinned against the Lord.’ And Nathan said unto David, ‘The Lord also hath put away thy sin ; thou shalt not die.’”

If we wish to draw any lessons from the repentance of any one, dead or living, it is a great assistance to us to know something of the character of the man, something of the sin from which he repented, something of the mode by which he was roused to repentance, something of the nature of the repentance itself. All these we have given to us in the case of David. There is no one in the Old Testament of whose character we know so much, both from his history, as told by others, and his Psalms, as sung by himself. His repentance is set before us especially, not only in the history, but in the two Psalms which occur in this day's service, and which in all probability were composed on this very occasion, the 32nd and the 51st.

I. First, then, let us look at his general character. It is a character difficult, perhaps, to understand, but its very difficulty makes it instructive. It is full of variety, full of impulse, full of genius ; it is like the characters of our own later times,—complicated, intricate, vast ; it covers a great range of characters amongst ourselves ; it is not like one class or character only, but like many ; it is like you, it is

like me; it is like this class and that class; it is like this man and that man. He is the shepherd, and the student, and the poet, and the soldier, and the King. He is the adventurous wanderer, strong and muscular, "his feet like the feet of harts, his arms strong to break even a bow of steel^a." He is the silent observer of the heavens by night, "the moon and the stars which God has ordained^b." He is the devoted friend, the first example of youthful friendship, loving Jonathan "with a love passing the love of women^c." He has the touching, tender sentiment of home and home-like recollections, that makes him long and say, "Oh that one would give me drink of the water of the well of Bethlehem^d!" He has the true chivalrous spirit of times and countries not his own, when he dashes the hard-won water on "the ground, and refuses to drink the blood of the men that have put their lives in jeopardy for him^e." He is the generous enemy, sparing his rival^f. He is the father mourning with passionate grief the loss of his favourite child:—"O my son Absalom, my son, my son, Absalom! would God I had died for thee, O Absalom, my son, my son^g!" Again and again we feel that he is one of us—that his feelings, his pleasures, his sympathies, are such as we outwardly love and admire, even if we do not enter into them. But yet more than this, he is exactly that mixture of good and evil which is in ourselves; not all good nor all evil, but a mixture of both—of a higher good, and of a deeper evil, yet still both together. Scripture sets them both before us: in him, as in ourselves, —in him, as in the world at large, we must make out their lesson as best we can. He is the man after God's own heart. He has attained a nearer vision of God than any patriarch or prophet before him. He has within him a love

^a Ps. xviii. 33. ^b Ps. viii. 3. ^c 2 Sam. i. 26. ^d 1 Chron. xi. 17.

^e 1 Chron. xi. 18. ^f 1 Sam. xxiv. 18. ^g 2 Sam. xviii. 33.

of the Eternal, a panting and craving for God's presence, such as we have hardly seen before or since. In his impassioned hymns of prayer and praise, all the ardour of his human tenderness for his friends, for his enemies, for his children and his people, for the heavens and the earth, seems to have reached its highest, or, if one may so use the word, its natural pitch; and, however much more clearly God has revealed Himself in later times, yet no language, no feelings have ever been found better fitted to express the devotions of the regenerate soul than the language and the feelings of the Psalms of David. His history tells us how many generations passed away before, even in the chosen people, such a gift could be produced; therefore let us be patient of its growth in any individual soul. It shews us also how this one fire of Divine love lights up every chamber of that various and intricate house of the human soul—various and intricate in every one, but in none more than in the wide and mighty heart of the son of Jesse.

But it is the other side of his character that we are now called to consider; and yet it is only by considering both sides together that we can draw its true lesson from either. It was to this tender, and brave, and loving character that the Prophet Nathan came, with the story of the hard-hearted, mean-spirited man who took from his poorer neighbour^b “the one little ewe-lamb that he had brought and nourished up, which had grown up together with him and with his children, which ate of his own meat and drank of his own cup, and was to him as a daughter.” Every just and generous feeling in David's heart was roused by the story: its simple pathos, now worn through and through by much repetition, was then felt in all the freshness of its first utterance: his anger was kindled against the man; and he said,

^b 2 Sam. xii. 1—4.

“As the Lord liveth, the man that hath done this thing shall surely die: and he shall restore the lamb fourfold, because he did this thing, and because he had no pity.” Every one who has read the history of David, who has felt the beauty of his character as revealed in his life and in his writings, must feel something of the same shock of astonishment which the King himself experienced when the dreadful answer was made, “Thou art the man.” No lengthened comment can add anything to the startling effect of the disclosure of this sudden descent from all that was high and good to all that was base and miserable.

II.—Let us now see how, from this union of glory and shame, of holiness and sin, we can draw the fitting lesson of David’s repentance and our own. First, let us observe how the Scripture narrative deals with the case. It does not exaggerate—it does not extenuate. David’s goodness is not denied because of his sin, nor his sin because of his goodness. The fact that he was the man after God’s own heart is not thrust out of sight because he was the man of Nathan’s parable. The fact of his sin is not denied, lest it should give occasion to the enemies of God to blaspheme. This is the first lesson that we learn. Whatever else we do, in urging others or in urging ourselves to repentance, let us be true to facts, true to ourselves, true to God. Compare the judgment on David with the judgments which we often pass on others, on ourselves, on the dead, and on the living. Think how we are inclined to excuse the sins of those with whom we agree, and to make much of the sins of those with whom we differ; think of the narrow and hasty divisions which, in the pulpit or in our own thoughts, we make of all classes into good *or* bad, without taking account of that much larger class of good *and* bad, of which we and the great mass of men are made up. And what a contrast do these human judgments present to that wise and impar-

tial history which sets before us, without fear or favour, in all its brightness and in all its darkness, the life of David. Scripture is fearless and true in its narrative ; Nathan was fearless and true in his rebuke and in his consolation. Let us endeavour, teachers and taught, to be true no less in our dealings with others, in our dealings with ourselves ; so, and so only, shall we get the grace for which we daily pray, of "*true repentance.*"

Secondly, the sin of David, and his unconsciousness of his own sin, and so also his repentance through the disclosure to him of his own sin, are exactly what are most likely to take place in characters like his, like ours, made up of mixed forms of good and of evil. The hardened, depraved, worldly man is *not* ignorant of his sin,—he knows it, he defends it, he is accustomed to it. But the good man, or the man who is half good, and half bad,—he overlooks his sin. His good deeds conceal his bad deeds, often even from others, more often still from himself. Even out of those very gifts which are most noble, most excellent in themselves, may come our chief temptations.

It has been sometimes said and believed that every man, even the worst, is attended by a guardian angel to watch over and foster whatever there is of good in his heart and in his life. It might almost be said and believed in like manner, that there is an attendant demon who besets every man, even the best,—an evil spirit that seems to grow even out of his good qualities, and under their cover from time to time completely to master and overpower him. Unconsciously, unwillingly, a man is seized as by some irresistible enemy ; he ceases to be himself,—he does and says what, like David, he can hardly believe to be his own acts or words when they are laid fairly before him. So was it with David—so it may be with us. How out of this state can we be roused to repentance ? In many ways, doubtless ; but often, most often,

as he was ;—by some friendly hand, by some faithful rebuke, by some sudden remonstrance ; nay, it may be, as in David's case, by some striking fiction or parable, which fixes our gaze upon ourselves, which tears the mask from our self-ignorance, which makes us "see ourselves as others see us." "Thou" who thinkest thyself religious, and all the while by thy untruthfulness, or by thy unfairness, "dishonourest God !,"—"Thou" who thinkest thyself enlightened, and liberal, and art all the while exclusive and narrow against those who do not agree with thyself,—“Thou” who thinkest thyself generous, and free, and manly, and art all the while unfeeling, and base, and childish, destroying the happiness of thine own home, and the homes of others,—“Thou” who thinkest thyself humble and submissive, and art all the while inflated with the vanity of knowledge, or influence, or rank, or attainments,—“Thou,” and such as thou, “art the man” who needest the warning voice of Nathan to lead thee to know thyself, and to repent of thy sin. And oh ! if thou hast such an adviser, faithful and true, who will be to thee as Nathan was to David—a friend who will not fear to tell thee of thy faults, who will not fear to sacrifice thy regard in doing so, who will lay his finger here, and here, and here, on thy secret faults,—put him not from thee as an unwelcome intruder ; thank God that thou hast such a friend ; treasure his counsels as rare gifts,—rare indeed, most rare, in this cowardly, smooth, and faithless world ; beware lest thou despise his lightest word, “not knowing” that through him “the goodness of God leadeth thee to repentanceⁱ.”

Thirdly, let us observe both the exact point of Nathan's warning, and the exact point of David's repentance. It is most instructive to observe that Nathan in his parable calls attention, not to the sensuality and cruelty of David's crime, but simply to its intense and brutal selfishness.

ⁱ Rom. ii. 23.

^j Rom. ii. 4.

Think of this, any whom it concerns ; remember this, even as regards the special sin of which David was guilty. Many, perhaps, who would excuse themselves on other grounds for the ruin which, by the indulgence of their own passions, they help to bring upon the bodies and souls of their fellow-creatures, might be startled, as was David, if once they could be convinced of its mean and selfish baseness.

“There were two men in one city, the one rich and the other poor.” “The rich” young “man” had all that he needed ; “the poor” old “man” had nothing save “one little ewe lamb, which he had brought and nourished up . . . which was unto him as a daughter.” Have there been ever, are there at this moment, any such two men in this city ? If there have been, or if there are, the parable of Nathan still lives for the warning, and for the repentance, of “him who did this thing,” not merely because he gave way to passion, not merely because he did dishonour to himself, but “because *he had no pity* ^k.”

It is remarkable, again, that even deeper than David’s sense, when once aroused, of his injustice to man, was his sense of his guilt and shame before God :—“Against Thee, Thee only have I sinned, and done this evil in Thy sight¹.” Dark as is the shade of the dark sin done to man, a yet darker shade falls over it when viewed in the unchanging light of the All-Pure and the All-Merciful. This is perhaps especially the case, with these grosser sins. But the language respecting David’s sin and repentance is instructive to a general congregation, because what was true of his sin is in its measure true of the sins of every one. David is driven by the very fervour of his penitence to speak of this one sin as he would have spoken of all sins. Of crimes, in all their magnitude, like his crimes, no member of any Christian congregation

^k 2 Sam. xii. 6.

¹ Ps. li. 4.

is ever likely to be guilty. But every one of us is in danger of falling into sins of which we have no expectation beforehand, of which, like David, we are ignorant even after we have committed them. Whatever be our special failing,—self-indulgence, vanity, untruth, uncharitableness,—and however it be made known to us,—by friends, by preachers, by reflection, by sorrow, by the death of our first-born, by the ruin of our house,—let David's feeling respecting it be ours. Every grievous sin is a wound to our consciences, is a stain upon our souls, in the sight, not, it may be, of man, but of God. The character is shaken by it. Others may see, though we do not,—God sees, though others do not,—a point where we have changed from better to worse; where good-nature has passed into weakness, or policy and prudence into craft and dishonesty, or philanthropy and zeal into acrimonious partisanship, or independence and activity into hardness and self-sufficiency. What we want if we are truly penitent—what we want if we are penitent as David was penitent, is that our downward course may be arrested, that a new, upward course may be given to our whole character. “Wash me *thoroughly* from my wickedness, and *cleanse* me from my sins. . . . Thou requirest *truth* in the *inward parts*. . . . Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be *clean*; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow. . . . O give me the comfort of *Thy help* again, and stablish me with *Thy free spirit*.”

These are not the words of unavailing remorse; they are not general confessions of general depravity, which belongs to all the rest of mankind as well as to us; nor minute confessions of minute sins, dragged out of their dark places by a too scrupulous casuistry. They are truly the desires for “repentance;” that is, for “a change of mind,” for a change, an elevation of character. They are the honest and simple

^m Ps. li. 2—12.

expressions of one who longs, as in the presence of God, to be delivered from the burden of his own faults and crimes; who loathes sin, because he has become acquainted with it; who is earnestly hoping and seeking to be made wiser, and better, and purer in his innermost self, that he may never again fall into the deep calamity which he "acknowledges" with his whole heart, and which "is ever before him^a," staring him in the face. To have clean hands and a pure heart, to make a fresh start in life, with a new spirit within him,—this was David's repentance, this alone is "repentance" in its ancient, Scriptural, Evangelical sense. All else may be emotion, or regret, or confession, or remorse, but it falls short of repentance. "Repentance" is not sorrow; it is the joyful, cheerful, manly endeavour "to walk henceforth in the ways of Christ, taking his easy yoke and light burden upon us; following Him in lowliness, patience, and charity; ordered by the governance of His Holy Spirit; seeking always His glory, and serving Him duly in our vocation with thanksgiving^o."

Fourthly, this leads us to see what is the door which God opens, in such cases as David's, for repentance and restoration. There is the general lesson, taught by this, as by a thousand other passages both of the Old and the New Testaments—that, as far as human eye can judge, no case is too late or too bad to return, if only the heart can be truly roused to a sense of its own guilt and of God's holiness. "Thou desirest no sacrifice;"—consider the immense force of the words; how wise, how consoling, how vast in their reach of meaning,—"Thou desirest no sacrifice, else would I give it Thee; Thou delightest not in burnt-offerings. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit: a broken and a contrite heart, O God, Thou wilt not despise^p." So spoke David in

^a Ps. li. 3.^o Commination Service.^p Ps. li. 16, 17.

the fulness of his penitence. So taught the Son of David in the fulness of His grace and truth¹.

But there is over and above this a special instruction in David's repentance, as viewed in connection with his whole character. "What advantage," it may be asked both by scoffers and by serious inquirers—"what advantage was there in David's generous and tender heart? what advantage in his devout and earnest aspirations? what advantage in his close communion with God, if he could thus fall away?" There was this advantage—that, great as was his fall, there was yet a hope—one may almost say, a certainty of restoration, which in another would not have been. The good of his former character was still there. It was overpowered, lost, stifled for the time, but it was capable of being roused again. There was still an eye to see, there was still an ear to hear; his indignation, unconscious as it was, against the rich man of the prophet's parable, shewed that the moral sense was not extinguished within him: his instant recognition of his guilt, "I have sinned against the Lord," shews that the conscience was not dead, but sleeping; that the lamp was not gone out beyond the means of rekindling its expiring light. Unlike Saul, there was no settled hardness of heart, which made even repentance but a gloomy remorse. He had but to return to himself, and that self, that better self, was at one with God. "And therefore Nathan said unto David, The Lord hath put away thy sin; thou shalt not die²."

The consequences of his crime indeed still remained, working out its own terrible retribution. His earthly career was never afterwards what it had been before; the sword never again departed from his house; his own sin was repeated over again in the lives of his sons: the loss of one child, the murder of another, the rebellion and death of a third and

¹ Luke xv. 20.

² 2 Sam. xii. 13.

fourth ; another exile, more grievous than that when in early and innocent youth he fled from the face of Saul,—all these calamities sufficiently justify the ways of God to man, and shew that sin, even in this world, even when pardoned and put away, leaves a long train of misery and shame behind. But still he was restored ; “ his transgression was forgiven ; his sin was covered ^a ;” “ a clean heart was created in him ; a right spirit was renewed within him ^t.” Once more in his Psalms—in these very Psalms of his penitence—he has been enabled to “ teach transgressors the ways of God ;” his “ lips were opened” again ; “ and his mouth has shewn forth the praise of God, and his tongue has sung aloud the righteousness of God ^u” for all future generations of mankind.

Two final lessons we may learn from this last aspect of David’s repentance. For others, it teaches us to regard with tenderness the faults, the sins, the crimes of those who, gifted with great and noble qualities, are, by that strange union of strength and weakness which we so often see, betrayed into acts which more ordinary, commonplace characters avoid or escape. We need not, nor dare, deny their sin : the sins of good men are in one sense worse than the sins of other men, because they are against greater light, because they cause greater scandal, because they cast a heavy discouragement on the lovers of goodness. But in another sense we must thankfully acknowledge the background, the atmosphere, so to speak, of excellence which renders a return from such sins possible. Our reverence for David is shaken, but not destroyed. He is not what he was before, but he is still far nobler and greater than many and many a just man who never fell and who never repented.

And for ourselves, let us remember the still more important lesson, that such a foundation of good as that which there was in David’s character is never thrown away. If it is

^a Ps. xxxii. 1.^t Ps. li. 10.^u Ps. li. 13—15.

not able to resist the trial altogether, it will at least be best able to recover from it. David's fall sufficiently teaches us not to rely on our religious principle however sound, nor to trust in our religious zeal, however fervent : but his repentance bids us humbly hope that whatever good purposes, and sincere prayers, and faith in God, and love of Christ, we have been able to retain amidst the changes and chances of the world, will stand in the evil day, and do us good service still ; there will be something to which we can appeal with the certainty of some response when the first flush of passion, the first cloud of self-deceit has passed away. Who knows what temptations, what trials, may come upon him this year, this week, this night ? Who knows but what the resolutions formed in his heart years ago, or now, or at this moment, may enable him to resist the temptation when it comes, or to recover from it if it has come ? "For this"—so we may apply to ourselves the very words of David in the 32nd Psalm—"For this shall every one that is godly make his prayer unto Thee in a time when Thou mayest be found ; and in the great waterfloods they shall not come nigh unto him. . . . Thou art my hiding-place ; Thou shalt preserve me from trouble : Thou shalt compass me about with songs of deliverance. . . . Be glad in the Lord and rejoice, O ye *righteous* ; be joyful, all ye that are *true of heart* *."

* Ps. xxxii. 6, 7, 11.

BY THE SAME AUTHOR.

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SERMON III.

THE REPENTANCE OF ESAU.

BY

JOHN, LORD BISHOP OF LINCOLN.

THE REPENTANCE OF ESAU.

A SERMON,

PREACHED IN

THE CHURCH OF ST. MARY-THE-VIRGIN,

OXFORD,

ON FRIDAY, FEB. 19, 1858.

BY

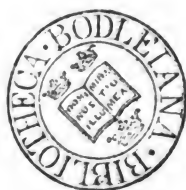
JOHN, LORD BISHOP OF LINCOLN.

OXFORD,

AND 377, STRAND, LONDON:

JOHN HENRY AND JAMES PARKER,

M DCCCLVIII.



A SERMON,

&c.

HEB. xii. 16, 17.

“Lest there be any fornicator, or profane person, as Esau, who for one morsel of meat sold his birthright. For ye know how that afterward, when he would have inherited the blessing, he was rejected: for he found no place of repentance, though he sought it carefully with tears.”

I NEED not detain you with this history. You all know how the hunter came weary and faint from the field, and how the wary Jacob asked his birthright as the price of the food which a brother should have given unbought. You remember how appetite prevailed over a weak and uninterested faith; and how conscience, as usual, was silenced by the plea of necessity: “Behold, I am at the point to die: and what profit shall this birthright do to me?” You will recollect, too, that the penalty followed, even though hastened by sinful means; and that God permitted the duplicity of Rebekah and Isaac to deprive Esau unjustly of the blessing he had justly forfeited. Then, for the first time, apparently, his sin found him out. Forty years ago he had bartered God’s gift for the brief gratification of appetite. He had forgotten the fact, perhaps, or had fancied it forgotten. But it was recorded in God’s book; and the punishment the Divine decree had linked to it, was silently, but surely, drawing on.

* Gen. xxv. 32.

He had sold his birthright; he had lost his blessing. In vain he would recal the words which had been spoken, and the deed which was done. In vain "he cried with a great and exceeding bitter cry^b." "For ye know how that afterward, when he would have inherited the blessing, he was rejected: for he found no place of repentance, though he sought it carefully with tears."

We are not led by this history to treat of the efficacy of a death-bed repentance. Esau's trial was in this life; and the blessings he forfeited, notwithstanding their spiritual relation and import, were themselves temporal. His case could but lend an imperfect and uncertain analogy. And in general, the question itself requires to be shifted from the point on which men usually place it. It is not the *efficacy* of death-bed repentance; it is the *probability* of death-bed repentance. There is no doubt that, for Christ's merits, true penitence will obtain mercy at the last hour; there is great doubt how far sorrow at the last hour is true penitence. We have every assurance that God will give pardon even to the latest repentance; but we have no assurance that He will give repentance to those who for a life-time have refused to repent.

We are thus led nearer to the true lesson of the history before us, and a very solemn one it is,—that the tendency of sensuality indulged is to bring a late remorse, but to prevent a timely penitence; to cause suffering, may be, but not contrition; the sorrow of the world that worketh death, not godly sorrow which worketh repentance to salvation. There is not a word to shew that, keenly though he felt his disappointment, Esau had any sense of his sin. It was his lost blessing which afflicted him, not his faithless self-indulgence; his forfeit, not his fault. There was no God-ward prayer for pardon in all that "great and exceeding bitter cry." The fruits shew

this. His sorrow inflamed him to hatred, and hatred gave him the heart of a murderer. His sin and its punishment alike led him further from God. "He found no place of repentance, though he sought it carefully with tears."

It will, of course, be necessary, as we pursue our subject, to bear in mind the distinction thus exemplified between "the sorrow of the world which worketh death, and godly sorrow which worketh repentance to salvation^c." The one sorrow for sin's consequences, the other sorrow for sin's guilt; the one for having injured ourselves, the other for having offended God; the one for the disgrace, the worldly loss, the enfeebled body or the unquiet mind; the other for the loss of God's favour and the sense of alienation from Him; the one dreading His punishment, the other longing for the restoration of His love; the one satisfied with impunity, the other thirsting for holiness; the one barren in all but feeble resolutions, the other working a thorough change of the inner and outer life; the one the natural product of the unregenerate heart, the other the gift of God by the operation of the Holy Spirit; the one the remorse of Esau and of Judas, the other the repentance of David and of Peter.

Now the proposition before us is, that the former of these—an ineffectual remorse—is the natural tendency of sensuality indulged, which, at the same time, tends to prevent the latter—a timely repentance unto salvation.

And here first (for practical lessons require and justify plain words) let us clearly understand what we mean by sensuality. We mean, of course, the yielding to the grosser sins of the flesh, whether dared openly or indulged in secret,—adultery, fornication, and lasciviousness; intemperance and gluttonous excess, whether encouraged and, as the world thinks, excused by the genial licence of society, or admitted, half-ashamed, in guilty solitude. We mean also the same

^c 2 Cor. vii. 10.

sins transacted mentally in the chambers of the imagination, even though want of opportunity, or shame, or timidity, or even some better motive, have restrained from the outward act. But we must include, besides, both those more reputable forms of self-indulgence which, stopping short of the excess which tarnishes character or injures health, are yet a daily slavery to appetite,—an habitual submission of the spirit to the flesh; and that negative self-indulgence which, resigned to what is thought innocent ease, never makes a sacrifice for another's sake or God's, and will not be roused to an effort even for what is great and good. In all these cases, though in different degrees, and with different shades of guilt, sensuality is the opposite to self-denial, and consequently to the following of Jesus, and the service of God.

1. Now the soul knows this. The most reckless knows that intemperance and impurity outrage God's law; the most tranquil and respectable lover of self feels, at least at times, that he is living below the better instincts of his own being, and at variance with the requirements of the Gospel. And hence the first fatal effect of sensuality indulged is the overlaying and stifling conscience. Sometimes this is done with a strong hand; and the headlong sinner thrusts the monitor by, as he rushes to indulgence, or drowns the unwelcome voice in excitement and the din of merriment. Sometimes it is effected—more slowly, perhaps, but not less surely—by the special pleading of a will determined to disobey, and the plausible lies which Satan has ever ready to suggest to the self-deceiver: and conscience is told that it is a morbid strictness which she is recommending; that natural pleasures are not forbidden by Nature's God; that the prohibitions of the New Testament had reference to heathen licentiousness, which has scarcely its parallel in the present day; that habitual intemperance and debauchery are indeed disgusting and wicked, but that an occasional indulg-

ence, especially under the peculiar circumstances of the case, is very different and very venial; that youth, at any rate, must not be strictly judged, nor restrained too severely, and may be better guarded against the temptations of manhood by some experience of the world; or even—(it is a common plea, notwithstanding its impiety)—that this one indulgence of appetite shall be the last, and will be followed by a sharp penitence and a lasting reformation.

Fallacies these all, and fictions, and the heart knows them to be such, even while admitting them; and therefore conscience is violated,—cheated, if not forced, into silence. The sad consequence slowly, may be, but surely, follows. The disregarded voice within is heard more rarely and feebly. The sense of evil is dulled and blunted. What shocked at first shocks no longer; it is endured, loved, craved after. The seared conscience grows callous to the touch of impurity, and its sensitive shrinkings and keen stings are felt no more to prompt the beginnings or to aid the struggles of repentance to salvation.

2. Together with this process is going on another no less perilous,—the gradual strengthening of the passions and appetites. This is a fact of common experience, and most of us, perhaps, can recall miserable examples,—the Helots, as it were, of the world's moral government,—of men enslaved by a passion whose tyranny they loathe, and compelled by the cravings of appetite to sins which have ceased to please. But it is too often forgotten that this wretched bondage is the *tendency* of each single act of unlawful self-indulgence, which drives another rivet into habit's chain, and feeds the imperceptible but certain growth of a gigantic power of evil. And it is a tendency, be it observed, arising not merely from the laws of mind, which we are apt to think are easily modified by the will, but from the laws of matter also, which we cannot alter, however much we can employ them. Those

appetites which have the body for their instrument, affect the body by their indulgence. They irritate its susceptibilities, and act on its nervous organization. They foster morbid cravings for gratification, terrible sometimes in their painfulness and power. And these no effort of will, no resolutions even of the sincerest, sharpest penitence, can eradicate or allay. They may be loathed, struggled with, by God's grace denied and mortified, but there they are—the sad consequences of the guilty past—to tempt, to torment, and to add a hundredfold to the difficulty, and therefore to the improbability, of a real repentance.

3. It is a kindred consequence of sensuality indulged, that it fills the mind with reminiscences and thoughts of evil. For it is a law of the mind, no less certain in its operation than those of the body, just now alluded to, that ideas, once associated, have a tendency to suggest each other in future, and, when associated often, become linked in a mutual bond which is well-nigh indissoluble. Hence it is that sights, and sounds, and thoughts—circumstances in themselves the most trivial and irrelevant—have become associated in the sinner's mind with images of impurity and recollections of unlawful pleasure: and ever and anon, through his whole future life, without the concurrence of his will, contrary, may be, to his desires and his prayers, in company alike or in solitude, aye, in the saddest, sometimes, and most sacred scenes, this terrible power of the past will thrill along the chord of association, and wake up reminiscences and forms of evil which pollute the soul, even though it may not entertain them, and tempt, although they may be overcome. A fearful engine for ill, brethren, in the hands of our spiritual foe, are these suggestions of the guilty past. To the sincere penitent they are a penalty, well merited, indeed, but very bitter; “a body of death” which he prays and strives against, but which clings to him still; a penance more humbling than sackcloth, more

painful than the macerating scourge. To the impenitent they are ever-recurring monitors of ill, and ministers of temptation,—blighting the growth of better thoughts, and withering the very life of prayer; polluting the soul with their presence, while they debilitate its perception of sin, and unfit and enfeeble it for repentance.

4. Together with these results of sensuality indulged, and partly in consequence of them, is the gradual deadening of the soul to the perception of spiritual things. "This people's heart hath waxed gross^e," said both the Prophet and the Saviour, though an interval of eight hundred years was between; and such will ever be the effect of similar causes. In the earliest steps of the downward course, it will often be, and particularly where there has been the careful training of parents or sponsors, or the atmosphere of a religious home, that the sense of spiritual things is sufficiently acute. The first sins bring often their immediate and severe punishment. God is *felt* to be displeased, and His face to be turned away; and the polluted soul is steeped in an agony of shame, and even entreats in an agony of prayer. It is well if it is so; *that* prayer may be the turning-point of present or the seed of future repentance. But often the stricken soul sullenly turns away from God, and seeks to hide from His displeasure, and to divert the pain of its self-dissatisfaction in employment or amusement; or, at any rate, the sin repeated takes off the edge of the shame, and enfeebles the earnestness of the prayer. God's presence, when feared, comes to be shunned, and is shunned till it is forgotten. The soul no longer communes with Him. There is no contact with Him, no spiritual union with Him in private or public prayer, in the reading of His Word, or in the Holy Communion. The forms are often continued long, sometimes through a whole life; but they are forms only: and,

• Cf. Isa. vii. 10; Matt. xiii. 5.

like all forms from which the spirit has departed, they only harden when they have ceased to aid. And especially is this the case if he, from whose religion self-indulgence has thus sucked out the life-blood, is himself set apart to minister in spiritual things. That unhappy man, preaching what he does not feel, saying prayers which he does not pray, administering ordinances and life-giving Sacraments which have no life or felt purpose to himself, is exposed to the daily growth, under the petrifying influence of habit, of hardness of heart and contempt of God's Word and Commandments.

But in all cases alike, where sensuality is indulged, the eye of faith grows dim. Truths once believed—and still not disbelieved—cease to have reality and power. The motives of the Gospel no longer move. Hope and fear, obligation, gratitude, and love, whose objects are things not seen, are overborne and lost in the rush and eagerness of the passions and appetites for things seen and earthy. The heart waxes gross. Warnings, chastisements, invitations, the pleadings of God's Word and ministers, fall on the soul heavily, may be, but without impression, or waken but a feeble and ineffectual response. And even when these agencies of the Divine long-suffering, or the approach of the last great crisis, has roused the soul and alarmed it, it finds too often that its strength has departed from it. It cannot grieve for sins which it knows it ought to grieve for; it cannot clasp again by faith the Saviour it has neglected and dishonoured; it would pray now, but, alas! it cannot pray. As far as human eye can trace, (but its real history is known to God alone,) that wretched heart which sensuality has made gross, "has found no place of repentance, though it sought it carefully with tears."

5. But the great and solemn truth which underlies all this, and of which the effects of sensuality at which we have

glanced are the outward manifestations, is this—that the Holy Spirit will not abide with the sensual and self-indulgent. “If any man have not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of His. . . . If ye live after the flesh, ye shall die; but if ye, through the Spirit, do mortify the deeds of the body, ye shall live^f.” But “the flesh lusteth against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh, and these are contrary the one to the other.” When, therefore, the young Christian has, in baptism, the promise of God’s Spirit visibly signed and sealed to him, and is set apart as a temple of the Holy Ghost, he has that presence and power covenanted to him by which alone he can fight the good fight against the world, the flesh, and the devil, and become conqueror over the fleshly lusts which war against the soul.

But if, notwithstanding this presence and power, he gives rein to the wandering thought and wandering eye, parleys with temptation, instead of fleeing or resisting it, and pollutes soul and body with sensual sin; if his first remorse is soothed or stifled, his first resolutions broken or forgotten, and the pleading voice within disregarded or silenced by some poor sophistry; if the sin is indulged either in act or imagination, and the sensual habit forms and gathers strength,—the Spirit, resisted and grieved, will not always strive. Its voice is heard less often; its light burns dimmer. It leaves—by degrees, may be, and as it were unwillingly—its polluted temple; as did the visible presence, the cherub-borne glory of Jehovah in Ezekiel’s vision,—first lingering on the threshold of the house, then at the door of the east gate, and then on the mountain on the east of the city^h. But it departed, and for ever; and so does God’s Spirit from the sensual soul. There are many trials, doubtless, many a solemn warning

^f Rom. viii. 9, 13.^g Gal. v. 17.^h Ezek. x. 11.

and earnest pleading with the better mind ; but at length is spoken that most fearful sentence of the justice of a long-suffering God, "Ephraim is joined to idols ; let him alone ⁱ."

Such, therefore, brethren, is the tendency of sensuality indulged,—to beget a late remorse, but to prevent a timely penitence. There are degrees, doubtless, in its consequences, as there are degrees in its guilt ; but in all cases they are sufficiently sad. There is that self-dissatisfaction which is never wanting to him who yields to his lower appetites, degrading him in the judgment of his own conscience ; there are cravings and tyrant desires, which it is disappointment to indulge, but pain to deny ; there are ineffectual resolutions and efforts for amendment, which the impotent will makes feebly from time to time, expecting, and almost half hoping, not to be able to perform ; there is the deadening of the soul to spiritual truth, when faith is concerned about notions, not realities,—words, not things, and prayer has lost its desires, and almost its meaning, and the forms of religion are maintained without any sentiment or life, or thrown away, perhaps, themselves, as a weariness ; and there are tremors, from time to time, and paroxysms of remorse, which will catch at false succour on the right hand or the left, (instead of leading straight on to the Cross and the Saviour) : on the one side, at the human mediators of the Church of Rome, and its machinery of pardon without true penitence ; on the other, at the lie of the Antinomian, which proffers safety without holiness,—a cross which may be trusted in, but need not be borne : and there is, alas ! sometimes, as a warning, probably, to others, even on this side the grave, a blank and terrible despair.

Within this city is a nameless grave ; the earth has

ⁱ Hos. iv. 17.

hardened over it for twenty years and more. She whose dust moulders there had been baptized, doubtless, into the Church of Christ,—had received God's promises, and had listened the truths of the Gospel. Warnings, no doubt, too, there had been, in the probation of a long life, and pleadings, and opportunities for repentance. What had been her peculiar temptations, what her misfortunes, what the history of her inner life, I know not;—the great Judge of all the earth will weigh them in His righteous balance. But this I know,—that when the last hour came, it came without one feeble ray of peace or hope. There was pain on that death-bed; there was terror; there was remorse for the past, there was despair for the future. The glazed eyes glared wildly at unseen shapes around; the hands were waved convulsively to drive them off; the moans which broke from the trembling frame were the very accents of hopeless fear. And though for a while, as some prayer was read, or some sentence of Holy Writ, there would be a brief respite, as though the sacred words could hold in check the present power of evil, yet soon the agony of terror set in again, till the last struggle closed the fearful but instructive scene.

May God in His mercy deliver each one here from the drunkard's death! But remember, brethren,—I speak to each man and woman present,—that every sensual sin committed, every appetite unlawfully indulged, every act of impurity, or intemperance, or selfish gratification—nay, every thought of evil cherished in secret, every morbid day-dream of the guilty mind,—may be a step onward in the path to such a death, or to that second death of which this is but the faint terrestrial shadow.

O how much happier, even in this life, is the path of timely self-denial; the taking up the cross to follow Christ! He too has a yoke, no doubt, and a burden; but "His yoke is easy

and His burden is light^k." Maintained in His strength, the struggle against sin invigorates, and the warfare itself is peace. There is the glow of conscious rectitude,—that remnant of a happier, holier state, which God's mercy has preserved to us from the wreck of Paradise. There are the passions calmed, and the chastened appetites, more sensible of their healthy and lawful enjoyments. There are pure thoughts, and an unpolluted memory, and a mind undistracted and unenfeebled by the haunting forms of evil. There is conscience, tender and sensitive, shrinking from the approach of sin, and, when sin is admitted,—(and who does not sin?)—bringing the soul at once to God through Christ, ashamed and sorrowing,—seeking and finding pardon, and peace, and strength. There is faith which sees the invisible, with eye undimmed by the film which self-indulgence spreads; and love which cannot abide with the lust of the flesh, "shed abroad in the heart by the Holy Ghost which is given unto us^l." And above all, there is the genial happiness of a heart at peace with God, and bearing in itself, in the work which God has wrought there, the witness of the Spirit that we are the sons of God, "the earnest of our inheritance until the redemption of the purchased possession^m." Such, at least, is the tendency of timely self-denial; realised, for the most part, as God grants His grace, in proportion to the simplicity of our faith, the humility of our spirit, the fervency of our prayers, and the earnestness of our endeavours.

But if any hear me to whom such words seem to come too late; who have the stain on their soul, and feel the chain of habit round them,—what shall I say to you, brethren? that there is no "place of repentance" for you? God forbid. There is "a fountain opened for sin and for un-

^k Matt. xi. 30.^l Rom. v. 5.^m Eph. i. 14.

cleannessⁿ;" and you, even you, may wash and be clean. I point you to Him who touched the leper and healed him; who shrank not from the poor fallen penitent who kissed His feet, but dismissed her with pardon and a blessing; and for whose merits (though dimly shadowed then in typical rites) the polluted king of Israel was washed whiter than snow, restored and upheld by God's free Spirit. "Him that cometh unto Him, He will in no wise cast out^o." He is ready to give you repentance and remission of your sins; to restore you to your reconciled Father; to prompt your resolutions, aid and preserve your prayers, make your endeavours persevering, and crown your struggles with success. But you must go to Him now. The preacher of the Gospel, with the Bible in his hand, may promise present pardon; but he may not promise future penitence. *Now* you must examine and humble yourself, confess, resolve, pray,—earnestly pray,—trust in God's mercy and your Saviour's merits, and proclaim from this moment a life-long war against self and your besetting sins. Do this *now*,—sincerely, heartily, and counting the whole cost,—and there is many a struggle doubtless before you, and many a perilous temptation, many a wrestling prayer and painful lusting of the flesh against the Spirit; and some falls, may be, with their shame and bitter sorrow,—but there is God's pardon covenanted to you, and Christ's blood cleansing you, and the ordinances of His Church aiding you, and the Almighty Spirit striving with you and for you; and though the body of this death may cling close, yet God *will* deliver you through Jesus Christ our Lord^p. But if you delay, the Gospel has no promises, and the preacher can only warn. Each sin committed, each evil thought indulged, each pleading of conscience (such as is, may be, stirring in you now,) neglected or put off to "a

ⁿ Zech. xiii. 1.

^o John vi. 37.

^p Rom. vii. 24, 25.

more convenient season,"—nay, each day and hour of this ebbing life, is bringing on the inevitable time, when "the exceeding bitter cry" will be too late, when the sinner must be rejected when he would inherit the blessing, and will find no place of repentance, though he seek it carefully with tears.

SERMON IV.

THE REPENTANCE OF ESAU.

BY

JOHN LEIGH HOSKYN, M.A.,

RECTOR OF ASTON TIRBOLD, BERKS.

THE REPENTANCE OF ESAU.

A SERMON,

PREACHED IN

THE CHURCH OF ST. EBBE,
OXFORD,

ON FRIDAY, FEB. 19, 1858.

BY

JOHN LEIGH HOSKYNs, M.A.,

RECTOR OF ASTON TIRROLD, BERKS.

OXFORD,

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JOHN HENRY AND JAMES PARKER.

M DCCC LVIII.

Lenten Sermons.

No. 4.



A SERMON,

8c.

HEB. xii. 16, 17.

“Lest there be any fornicator, or profane person, as Esau, who for one morsel of meat sold his birthright. For ye know how that afterwards, when he would have inherited the blessing, he was rejected: for he found no place of repentance, though he sought it carefully with tears.”

THIS chapter, following upon the eleventh, which enumerates so many who had suffered and died for the faith, is a continuation of the same subject, and an exhortation against apostacy, or falling away from Christ through persecution. The apostle points, in the last instance, to Jesus, the chief martyr of all, and bids the Hebrews, for their encouragement, look unto Him, who, “for the joy that was set before Him, endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God.” “Consider Him,” says the apostle, “lest ye be wearied and faint in your minds. Ye have not yet resisted unto blood, striving against sin. Wherefore, lift up the hands which hang down, and the feeble knees.” Then, in the verse immediately before my text, which still pursues the same idea, he says, “Look diligently, lest any man fail of (or fall from) the grace of God,—lest any root of bitterness, springing up, trouble you,” i. e. lest there be any turning away from the Lord; for in Deut. xxix. 19, such turning from the Lord is called “a root that beareth gall and wormwood.” Then the apostle continues, “Lest there be any fornicator,” (in a spiritual sense, a person unfaithful to his religious vows and baptismal obligations,

and polluting himself by idolatry), “or profane person, as Esau, who for one morsel of meat sold his birthright.” So be watchful, the Apostle seems to urge, lest ye are seduced and allured by some sudden temptation presented to you, perhaps, in a moment of extremity, when nature is wearied and exhausted by suffering; do not for any earthly advantage sell your birthright, and barter your eternal salvation and your hopes of glory for transitory ease or pleasure. Oh! sell not your birthright, which reaches through eternity, for anything temporal. Remember how bitterly Esau afterwards regretted his foolish, his mad exchange, and would have inherited the blessing; but Isaac’s words could not be reversed, and vainly Esau sought to change his father’s mind. “He found there no place for repentance, though he sought it carefully with tears.”

It is true that in its first and most obvious meaning the warning of the text is not immediately applicable to us. We are not likely to fall away from Christ through persecution, but this is the very reason why we are in greater danger of falling away through the allurements of the world and the flesh. Just in proportion as the Church is freed from enemies without, it is more endangered by enemies within. Persecution makes apostates, and security and peace make apostates; and the only difference is that the danger of apostacy is far greater in times of the Church’s peace, because men may fall away then from all real religion, and faith, and trust in Christ, without attracting public notice, or incurring shame and dishonour; and also because they may fall away inwardly, and still keep up the forms of religion—join in the assemblies of the saints, attend the ministry of the Word, and even partake of the Holy Communion. Nay, they may be quite unconscious themselves of their real state before God, and while they have a *name that they live, they may be dead.*

My brethren, I apprehend it was with the view of providing some remedy for this danger which surrounds a Church in times of peace and security, that these special services have been set on foot. We are in danger, in times like these, of a secret, silent, gradual decay of faith and practice; of falling away from grace through love of ease,

business, or pleasure, or care; we are in danger of losing hold of a deep sense of the superiority of spiritual and eternal things over those which are present and temporal; of being swallowed up by worldly and carnal interests, or of being swept away, by the flood of present fashion and opinion round us, from our footing on the eternal realities of an unseen world. Fallen man is ever prone to degenerate; and even among the children of God, every effort is required to stem the mighty tide of opposition to good, and tendency to evil and corruption, which we see around us, and feel within us. It was therefore a wise and far-sighted provision of the early Church, which set apart a certain season before Easter for bodily discipline, greater separation from the world, and more diligent prayer and self-examination; and it is instructive to observe that the season of Lent—which was much shorter in times of the Church's danger and persecution—was lengthened in times of her worldly prosperity. The need of such a season of mortification was far greater when the Church was honoured and caressed, and when wealth and dignity were lavished upon her, than in the times of her poverty, her suffering, and her humiliation.

Let those who may think slightly of this sacred season, apostolic in its origin, consecrated by the authority of so many ages, and the clear voice of our own reformed Church, look round the world—look at the general tone of society, at the general standard of morality,—look, lastly, into their own hearts, and their own real state before God, and ask whether we do not need some such season to call us awhile from this vain world, that we may ask ourselves whether there be in us no symptoms of decay in grace, and faith, and love, through the fraud and malice of the devil, or our own carnal will and frailness; no danger of, Demas-like, forsaking Christ, having loved this present world; or becoming, like Esau in my text, *profane*, and thinking lightly of the hopes and promises of a future inheritance in comparison with carnal ease and earthly gratifications.

It may assist such reflections as these, and lead us to a closer self-examination, and a deeper and truer repentance,

if, in a humble dependence on the teaching of the Holy Spirit, we endeavour to understand, 1. Wherein Esau's profaneness consisted; and, 2. Why his prayers and tears, when he would afterwards have inherited the blessing, were rejected.

You all remember the brief account of Esau selling his birthright. How he came in from the field faint with weariness and hunger; how Jacob, his brother, made pottage of lentiles, and Esau cast his eyes upon it, and said, "Feed me, I pray thee, with that same red pottage, for I am faint." And Jacob said, "Sell me this day thy birthright; and Esau said, Behold I am at the point to die: and what profit shall this birthright do to me? And he sold his birthright to Jacob, confirming it with an oath. Then Jacob gave Esau bread and pottage of lentiles, and he did eat and drink, and rose up and went his way. *Thus Esau despised his birthright.*"

His birthright, as the eldest born, gave him a double portion of the paternal inheritance, a right of rule and government over the family; but the chief advantages of it were spiritual; the priesthood, and the blessing which ran from Abraham, and was communicated from father to son, and contained the promise of the Saviour, "in Whom all families of the earth should be blessed," were comprehended in it; all the spiritual privileges belonging to Abraham's line, as God's family chosen out of all the earth;—these belonged by birth to Esau as the firstborn, and these things, partly temporal, chiefly spiritual, but all *future*, he despised, and sold for a present and momentary enjoyment.

We may observe that Esau was not what is generally meant by an ungodly man; no great sins are laid to his charge: *but he was—what God abhors—a self-indulgent, easy, thoughtless man of the world*, bent on present enjoyment, and in his heart despising, or disbelieving, the promises of God, which are objects of faith, and not of sight. He is the representation of an immense class of persons who are called Christians, and may be outwardly decent and moral, but who do not live, or attempt to live, as if the promises of the Gospel were realities, and heaven an object worthy of man's highest desires and most strenuous efforts. No; they believe in the world, they believe in wealth, in respectability, in a good

position in society, in personal ease and comfort, in a full purse, in a well-furnished table,—these things they believe in as realities worth a man's aiming at, but they believe *really* in nothing beyond this world; at least, their belief is a mere name, and they will never sacrifice any present gain or pleasure for all the glories of a heavenly crown. The text furnishes us with a name for this state of mind and heart so displeasing to the Almighty,—it is *profaneness*: “Lest there be any *profane* person, like Esau, who for one morsel of meat sold his birthright.” He is profane, then, who without being guilty, perhaps, of gross outward offence, thinks so little of all the promises of God revealed to us in His Word,—thinks all so uncertain, and has so little care and concern for things spiritual, that he is willing to exchange heaven for earth, the things of eternity for the things of time, future glory for present pleasure. Yes, and even for the mere transitory gratification of a *bodily appetite*. The apostle seems to mark this with an especial emphasis—that for *one morsel of meat* Esau sold his birthright. It was not even for honour, not for gain, not for glory, but for *a morsel of meat, a mess of pottage*; that he would not allow even all the privileges and dignity of his birthright to interfere with the gratification of his appetite. He was so lost to any real value or regard for his birthright, so entirely the slave of the flesh, that he was willing to purchase the satisfying of his hunger, or rather the indulgence of his fancy, at the price of all the peculiar privileges of the first-born. We might think such an act of madness, such an act of extravagant folly, almost impossible, were not the same *profaneness* to be witnessed every day and in every place.

How many thousand—nay, millions—are at the present time forfeiting eternal life, and all its unspeakable bliss, for the sake of mere bodily pleasures—for the sake of the poor, paltry gratification of the appetites and passions of the body. Look at the drunkard and intemperate man: he for one morsel of meat sells the birthright—he barter heaven for the brutal pleasures of intoxication—he sells to the devil all the privileges of Church-membership here, all the peace, and happiness, and security of God's elect in this world, and the

blessings of the life to come, that he may indulge his lust for the intoxicating draught.

Look at the unclean and licentious man—the whoremonger, the frequenter of houses of infamy, the seducer of virtue, the artful ruiner of youthful innocence and unsuspecting confidence: he, too, is a *profane* person; he sells his true dignity as a Christian, his birthright, his character here, his hopes hereafter, for the pleasure of this vile body,—*he* sells himself to the devil for lust.

But, as I have before observed, we must not confine our idea of *profaneness* to the grosser forms of sensuality. These are the most obvious; but what shall we say to that larger class of persons, respectable and decent, perhaps, but entirely worldly and self-indulgent; moral, for character, not conscience' sake; honest, not from fear of God, but of man; regular, it may be, in the outward forms of devotion, but offering God only the tribute of their lips, not of the heart; who act always from worldly, not religious principles; who would not scruple at unjust gains, if they could be done secretly; or even at immoralities, if only they could be kept hid; who, with all their professions of religion, never shew any earnestness about it, as if heaven were indeed a truth, and the promises of God to be believed. And do not those persons come under the class of *profane* who will never allow religion, and its duties and worship, to interfere in any way with their *personal ease*? who are religious only so far as it interferes with no formed habits of self-indulgence and comfort; who never rise early to watch and pray; never attend God's house when it involves trouble or any inconvenience; never exercise any discipline of the body by fasting or abstinence, because it is attended with self-denial; who sacrifice neither time nor trouble for their soul's sake; who will be at no real *pains* to gain heaven?

What does this mean, but that either they disbelieve God's promises of eternal life, or else that they do not think them worth any earnest, laborious, self-denying and persevering efforts!

Surely their sin is that of the Israelites who in the wilderness, though told repeatedly of the glories of Canaan, its

blessedness, its beauty, and fertility, “thought scorn^a” of it, and still looked longingly back to Egypt, or faintly and doubtingly towards the Promised Land, and so never beheld and never set foot on that “land which floweth with milk and honey, the glory of all lands.”

Or it is like the cool contempt of those who, in the Gospel, were bidden to the great supper,—“but they made light of it^b.”

It is doubtless true that in Esau, as in all whom he represents, the profane contempt of his birthright arose chiefly from *inconsideration*,—from want of having ever seriously considered all that it entailed and comprehended; for the immensity of his loss, and what he had forfeited, seems at last to have burst upon his mind with an intense agony, as that of a man when too late aroused to a sense of what he had before little esteemed or understood. But was there not a profaneness in his ignorance, blindness, and inconsideration? And will it be any excuse for the worldly or careless man at the Day of Judgment, that he sold his birthright of heaven through inconsideration or through ignorance? Let us be assured such a plea will be unavailing. Were not the promises, the hopes, the blessings, present and future, to be found in Christ *worth consideration*? There were the Scriptures—there were Christ’s ministers—there were the services of His Church: were not these enough to teach and guide to heaven, if a *profane contempt* of things spiritual had not stopped the ear and hardened the heart? Shall ignorance and inconsideration be pleaded? But why ignorant, why inconsiderate, but through profaneness? Earthly interests were not sacrificed through inconsideration; and why heavenly? The intricacies of earthly gain and loss could be mastered—every earthly prospect and hope could be nicely calculated, and diligently laboured for, and patiently waited for—matters of business could be distinctly understood: here was no inconsideration; here was no ignorance. And shall we say at God’s bar, I sold my birthright of heaven and glory *through inconsideration*?

Would we bring our minds steadily and fixedly to con-

^a Psalm cvi. 24, Prayer-book version.

^b Matt. xxii. 5.

template what our birthright and our blessing as Christians really are, here and hereafter, we could not lightly value or regard them. The miser counts and counts again his hoarded treasure, the man of business knows his present means and his future expectations. Do Christians search God's Word to ascertain what He has promised to His saints?

Look at some parts of the believer's birthright here in this life. Reconciliation and peace with God, through our Lord Jesus Christ; a sense of His pardoning love and favour; the enjoyment of sonship and adoption; the removal of the spirit of fear, and in its place love as towards a heavenly Father; the assurance of His guiding and supporting Providence, that "all things shall work together for good to them that love Him;" access to the throne of grace in prayer, with a certainty that we are heard; the privilege of carrying every care to Him, and making our requests known unto Him, and enjoying in consequence "the peace of God, which passeth all understanding." Then the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, the Comforter, in our hearts, as an earnest of the future inheritance—our bodies made members of Christ and temples of the Holy Ghost—all the fruits of the Spirit gradually being formed in us, and gilding life with a continual inward sunshine of "love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance."

Especially consider the happiness arising from the exercise of Christian charity and benevolence. The blessings of the poor, the grateful tribute of warm and thankful hearts, the inexpressible joy following acts of kindness and Christian sympathy. Think of the holy happiness of Christian friendship, of heart bound to heart by the highest of all bonds—union in Christ. Think of all the calm and deep joy which follows holiness: a mind at rest, a heart at ease, a conscience void of offence towards God and towards man; a body kept in subjection to soberness, temperance, and chastity; a temper subdued; thoughts brought under captivity to Christ. Think of the pure and satisfying pleasures arising from the devout study of the Word of God, from the services of God's house, the holy Table of Christ's Body and Blood, the communion of saints, a tranquil death-bed, full of the hope of the resur-

rection and life everlasting! Verily "godliness hath the promise of the life that *now is*, as well as that which is to come." Surely "her ways are ways of pleasantness, and all her paths are peace. She is a tree of life to them that lay hold of her, and happy is every one that retaineth her."

Such is a most imperfect sketch of the Christian's birth-right and blessing, *even in this life*; but what is it to that which follows in the next? Who shall say what is comprehended under that familiar term, *Eternal Life*? **ETERNAL LIFE**! Oh! what highest effort of the imagination can reach even to the faintest conception of such a word as this? We read of those "many mansions" which Christ is preparing for His people, "of an inheritance incorruptible, undefiled, and that fadeth not away, reserved in Heaven" for us; we read that if we are children of God now, we shall be "heirs of God and joint-heirs with Christ" hereafter. That "our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a *far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory*." That "our vile body will be fashioned like unto Christ's glorious Body;" that "sown in corruption, it shall be raised in incorruption; sown in weakness, it shall be raised in power; sown a natural body, it shall be raised a spiritual body:" or, that if we are alive when Christ comes in His glory with all His holy angels, we shall "be caught up together in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we shall be ever with the Lord." Brethren, which ever of us shall be among the joyful company of the redeemed will say, "Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love Him." We shall exclaim, as the Queen of Sheba did on beholding the glory of Solomon^c, "It was a true report that I heard in mine own land of thy acts and of thy wisdom, *howbeit, I believed not the words until I came, and mine eyes had seen it, and behold the half was not told me*."

Oh! with such things promised and secured to us on the unfailing Word of God,—"*God who cannot lie*;" of Christ, who, "*if it were not so would have told us*;"—such things present and future, part to be possessed now as an earnest

^c 1 Kings x. 6, 7.

and foretaste of what is to come; shall there be among us any “*profane* person, as Esau, who for one morsel of meat sold his birthright?”

2. “For ye know that how afterward, when he would have inherited the blessing, he was rejected: for he found no place for his repentance, though he sought it carefully with tears.” Words how unspeakably solemn! Why did Esau weep, why did he pray, and seek carefully for a reversal of his father’s words, and all in vain? Because in all his tears and prayers there was *no genuine repentance*, and because, even such as they were, *they were too late*. How many deceive themselves by a seeming repentance! How many never distinguish between sorrow and tears for the *consequences of sin*, and deep penitence for *the sin itself*; between the *tears of nature* and the *tears of grace*. Esau’s tears were shed, not because he felt his profaneness and his sin in despising his birthright, but because he now saw the temporal and worldly loss which that act had occasioned. He grieved that Jacob was made his superior and his lord; of this he repented, and sought “carefully with tears” the reversal of his sentence from his father Isaac: and hence he cried with an exceeding bitter cry, and said, “Hast thou but one blessing, my father? Bless me, even me also, O my father. And Esau lifted up his voice and wept.”

Observe that only *natural* feelings are at work here: he only grieves at the temporal consequences of his sin. It is “the sorrow of the world that worketh death;” we recognise nothing of the “godly sorrow which worketh repentance not to be repented of.” Esau’s sorrow was from nature, and wholly concerning earthly things; but godly sorrow is from *grace*, and is the Lord’s work in the heart, and wholly refers to heavenly things. How important is it that we should carefully distinguish between these two kinds of sorrow after sin. Is it true godly sorrow for the guilt and sin, for the offence against God? or is it the sorrow of the world—the tears and regret which may often arise from loss of prospects, failure of earthly plans, shame at public exposure of ill conduct, failure of health, approach of death?

True repentance, my brethren, will make a man hate, and

abhor, and loathe himself on account of his *sin against God*, and not only mourn and weep over its temporal consequences, and the suffering and sorrow it has occasioned. It is the *sin*, the guilt, the shameful ingratitude towards a merciful God and Saviour, the pollution, the degradation, the violation of vows, the dishonour done to His Holy Name, the crucifying Christ afresh, the grieving of the Holy Spirit. These things (apart from the mere temporal consequences of his sin) press upon the penitent's heart, and bow him to the dust; and make him cry with David, "Against *Thee*, *Thee* only have I sinned, and done this evil in *Thy* sight." And thus true repentance will ever be accompanied and recognised by profound *humility*. There is not a trace of humility in Esau's conduct, in his bitter cry, his prayers or his tears; they are only the outward expression of vexation and disappointment. There is no brokenness of spirit, no contrition visible in him; nothing of the returning prodigal's spirit—"Father, *I have sinned against heaven and before thee*, and am no more worthy to be called thy son, make me as one of thy hired servants." We see not in him the bowed head and beaten breast of the publican, and we hear not the short yet comprehensive prayer, "God be merciful to me a sinner."

Nor do we see in him any effort towards a *forsaking of sin and reformation of life*,—another sure mark of a genuine repentance. When a man truly repents he will bend all his strength, and make this the burden of his daily prayers, that he mortify and crucify sin within him. This is one sure mark of godly sorrow, as distinguished from the sorrow of the world. "Behold," says the apostle, "that ye sorrowed after a godly sort, what carefulness it wrought in you, yea what clearing of yourselves, yea what indignation, yea what fear, yea what vehement desire, yea what zeal, yea what revenge^d." Especially we shall see a true penitent softened in temper, gentler in disposition, forgiving toward enemies, patient under injuries, more loving, more charitable, more considerate. Was it so with Esau? No sooner had he gone from his father's presence than he fostered revenge, vowed, and plotted his

^d 2 Cor. vii. 11.

brother Jacob's death, and said in his heart, "The days of mourning for my father are at hand, then will I slay my brother Jacob." This was not the spirit of a penitent. Could a true penitent dry his tears of sorrow, and immediately harbour feelings of deadly hatred and revenge? Surely, if *humility* is a sure mark of genuine repentance, no less so is *charity*. Let us be very suspicious of the reality and sincerity of our repentance toward God, unless it is accompanied with love and good will toward man.

Besides, his tears and cries all came *too late*. The irrevocable words had passed Isaac's lips; the blessing, like the birthright, had been given to Jacob. There is a day of grace given to each of us in this life, and that allowed to pass unimproved, *can never return*. We have shadowings forth of this solemn truth in earthly things. In vain men would, if they could, recal a misspent youth, nay, a misspent hour, and employ it better; but *it cannot be recalled*. How many opportunities of advancement or of usefulness are *once* given to man, and if not seized are never repeated. How often do we hear of the death of some person for whom conscience tells us that we might have in some way done more temporally or spiritually than we did, been kinder, or more serviceable than we were; but the opportunity will *never be given us again*. How often would the once rebellious and undutiful child give all he has to recall past acts of ingratitude to a loving and tender parent—how has he wept over that parent's grave—how does he long for only one opportunity of expressing and manifesting his contrition,—but it cannot be, the past cannot be recalled. And so there is but this short, uncertain life given us as a time for repentance; *it is once, and only once*. This is our day of grace.

Doubtless it will be one of the miseries of the lost, that there will be *an awakening*, when too late, to a true sense of what they have forfeited for ever; it will burst upon them as the sense of his loss drew from Esau that exceeding bitter and piteous cry, and those agonizing tears. He only saw the folly and madness of his conduct when there was no remedy. Yes: and the misery of hell will be the piercing anguish of remorse with which lost souls will curse and

execrate their own unpardonable rejection of the proffered mercies of the Gospel; persons who will not see now, and will not understand, will then see and understand only too fully. Yes; "there," says our Lord, "shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth: when ye shall see Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, in the kingdom, and ye yourselves thrust out^e." But then, in vain those tears, in vain those prayers wrung from hearts only when *too late*. "Many," says our Saviour, "will seek to enter in, and shall not be able; when *once* the Master of the house is risen up, and hath shut to the door, and ye begin to stand without, and to knock at the door, saying, Lord, Lord, open to us, and He shall answer and say, I know you not whence ye are^f." Then they shall find no place of repentance; no way to change the Almighty mind and purpose, though they seek it carefully with tears. Isaac was unmoveable at Esau's tears, though "he trembled very exceedingly;" and God shall be inflexible; and sin unrepented of and unforsaken here must meet its eternal doom, "where their worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched."

Let me entreat you, then, my brethren, to fly from the sin of *profaneness*. Think not lightly of the birthright and the blessing of the Christian; despise them not; never allow the pleasures and interests of this world, or the comfort and ease of this perishing body, to rob you of a Christian's peace and happiness here, and everlasting glory hereafter. Learn rather to despise and disregard the world and the flesh. Remember our Lord's words: "He that loveth his life shall lose it, and he that hateth his life in this world shall keep it unto life eternal." Instead of despising heaven for the sake of earth, learn to despise earth for the sake of heaven. Consider often what a contempt our Saviour puts upon this life, its interests, and its pleasures, when put in comparison with that life which is to come. Esau despised his birthright for a passing satisfaction; learn you to disregard everything here in comparison with the glory promised to us hereafter. Walk not as those enemies of the cross of Christ, of whom the apostle tells us, even weeping, "whose end is destruction, whose god is their belly, and whose glory is in their shame,

^e Luke xiii. 28.

^f Luke xiii. 25.

who mind earthly things^g." Let our "conversation be in heaven," let us "walk by faith, and not by sight."

Let me beseech you, see that your repentance is *sincere* and *genuine*, the work of grace, the effect of the Holy Spirit upon the heart in answer to prayer, true penitence for the sin, and not only sorrow for its consequences; see that it be accompanied with a hearty forsaking of sin, bring forth fruits meet for repentance, and let it work in you deep humility and fervent charity.

And lastly, I beseech you repent *in time*. Defer it not till it is too late. God is now on His mercy-seat. He is nigh unto all them that call upon Him. Seek Him *now* "carefully," and most assuredly you shall find Him; "Walk while ye have the light, lest darkness come upon you." Christ is *now* able and willing to pardon and save you. He will wash every one of you from your sins, who will now come to Him with true repentance. "The blood of Jesus Christ can cleanse from all sin^h." Oh, repent and believe, while the door of mercy, and love, and reconciliation is open to you. Remember that, once closed, no tears, no prayers, can ever reopen it.

^g Philip. iii. 18, 19.

^h 1 John i. 7.

SERMON V.

THE REPENTANCE OF ESAU.

BY

SAMUEL, LORD BISHOP OF OXFORD,

**CHANCELLOR OF THE MOST NOBLE ORDER OF THE GARTER, AND LORD
HIGH ALMONER TO THE QUEEN.**

THE REPENTANCE OF ESAU.

A SERMON,

PREACHED IN

THE CHURCH OF ST. GILES,
OXFORD,

ON

FRIDAY, FEB. 19, 1858.

BY

SAMUEL, LORD BISHOP OF OXFORD,
CHANCELLOR OF THE MOST NOBLE ORDER OF THE GARTER, AND LORD
HIGH ALMONER TO THE QUEEN.

OXFORD,
AND 377, STRAND, LONDON:
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M DCCC LVIII.



A SERMON, &c.

GENESIS XXV. 34.

“ Thus Esau despised his birthright.”

IF we viewed this history of Esau's contempt of his birthright as nothing more than an allegory, woven out of the simple staple of family life as it existed in the world's youth amidst the pastures of the mountains of the East, and written to illustrate to us certain great spiritual truths—it would, from its beauty and its appositeness, well deserve our most careful study. But there is far more about it than mere appropriateness and power of a well-sustained similitude. In reading it, we must never forget that Esau is selected by God the Holy Ghost Himself, and set before us as the fearful example of a fruitless repentance; that we are distinctly and awfully warned that we Christians are directly exposed to the temptations under which, so far as concerns losing for ever his birthright, he hopelessly fell: and that if we be careless in our use of God's grace, his ruin will but foreshadow ours; his great and exceeding bitter cry in the day of his rejection be echoed by the far more terrible shriek of anguish which the more terrible rejection of a living soul from its true birthright will force from our hearts. Let us then see what it is that the Holy Ghost would teach us by this narrative: and to do this, let us see what the loss was which Esau incurred; how this came upon him, and what it was in his previous character

which prepared the way for that great disaster. "Ye know," says the Apostle, "how that when he would have inherited the blessing, he was rejected." This was his loss. It was when Esau heard that another had come before him and received the blessing, that he cried with a great and exceeding bitter cry, and lifted up his voice and wept. This, then, was his loss. The blessing of the first-born, with all that belonged to it, of rule over his brethren, and spiritual pre-eminence; this was what he lost; and it was an irreparable loss. For he "was rejected." He "found no place of repentance, though he sought it carefully with tears." There is nothing said here one way or the other as to his final condition. That is not in this narrative the point in question. That of which the Holy Ghost is here speaking is his right of birth in the family of the Patriarch; and *that* he had now lost finally and for ever. The opportunity of securing it had passed by; passed by unused by him—and it had passed for ever. This had been his by right of birth, and it was his no longer; it was gone from him,—gone from him to another. "I have blessed him; yea, and he shall be blessed." This was his loss; and it was by his own act that it came upon him. "Thus Esau despised his birthright."

For remember how it came upon him: he sold the birth-right for a passing, sensual pleasure. The tale is told in the Book of Genesis with all that extreme simplicity which marks the earlier narrative of the world's youth and the patriarchal dispensation. The characters of the two sons of Isaac, as they ripened into manhood, differed broadly and openly. Jacob was "a plain man, living in tents;" the inheritor in disposition of the quiet, meditative, musing character which, as we see him in the few incidents recorded in his life, is stamped so plainly upon the shepherd-prince, his father Isaac. Esau has far more of the dash and activity which catches with interest the natural eye. Leaving the

charge of the flocks and herds of the upland pastures, and with them the altar and the tent of Abraham, and the company and the teaching of the great father of the faithful, now an "old man, and full of years,"—he gives himself up to the sport of the chase, and becomes a cunning hunter, a man of the field. Coming in from one of these excursions, hungry and faint, he lights upon his brother just as he has prepared in the tent his vegetable meal, and, impetuous, sensual, and unrestrained, under the urgency of the desire of the food he sees and longs for, he scornfully barter, to obtain it, the rights of the first-born. "Behold," he says, "I am at the point to die : and what profit shall this birthright do to me ?" The craving of desire, that is, was strong upon him, and in comparison with its gratification, the future and the spiritual seemed to him nothing worth. For there was this twofold surrender. Though one part of the birthright was a double portion of the father's inheritance, yet, plainly, the higher part was a mere spiritual blessing. The promise of the coming Messiah had, ever since the first sentence of man's woe was spoken by his God, been the light of hope by which his sky was brightened. To be the father of that promised seed, in whom "all the families of the earth" should be "blessed," had been the greatest of all the promises which God had given to Abraham. The inheritance of this specific promise was the special blessing of the first-born ; and the mysterious destiny which had hung round their father since the promise was uttered, that in "Isaac shall thy seed be called," was now to descend as the peculiar spiritual inheritance through one of his children. This, doubtless, it was that, in spite of all the faults of her character, Rebekah's faith apprehended as the special blessing of her youngest son, and for this she taught him, as her favourite, most rightly to long, but also to endeavour by far too human an interference with the purposes of God, prema-

turely to secure. This it was that Esau contemned when he "despised his birthright;" and it is this contempt which is fixed upon his character by the apostle's words, that he was a "profane person;" one with no supreme regard for unseen verities, but who for the sweetness of a passing morsel of the food he longed for, was willing to barter his spiritual inheritance: and so for the instant gratification of an appetite, the mortification of which his sensual fancy painted to him as death, he sold the inheritance of Abraham and the blessing of Isaac. Nor could the thought of God Himself stay for the time the turbulent flood of his animal desire, for he confirmed the bargain of his profanity by an appeal to "the God of Abraham," and "the fear of Isaac:" for Jacob said unto him, "Swear now unto me: and he sware;" and the God whose Name he thus profaned confirmed his evil choice. The contempt was written down on high, and the birthright had departed from him. So far as this was concerned, his day of trial was over, his probation passed, and his sentence irreversible. Nor, so far as we can see in the sacred narrative, was there ever in his soul any true contrition for his evil choice. There was, indeed—which is wholly another thing—a passionate sorrow for its consequences; there was "the loud and exceeding bitter cry:" but even at that moment there is nothing which looks like true repentance;—there is a craving for the benediction which was to bring worldly prosperity and abundance, none for the distinctive blessing which faith would have apprehended, as connected with the promised seed and the coming Messiah. And so there is the supplication, "Hast thou but one blessing, O my father? Bless me, even me also, O my father."

Moreover, all his after life is of a piece with this. There is the marriage of inclinations with the daughters of the land, the taking to him whom he chose when the gust of passion swept in that direction, without regard to its being

“a grief of heart to Isaac and Rebekah,” without fear or repugnance as to mingling the seed of Abraham with that of the doomed children of Heth. And even in that brighter hour, when God turns aside his wrath against his brother, and he appears before us in the blessed majesty of forgiving might, there is still the aspect of the same wild, passionate, untutored nature, yielding evermore to the passing breath of inclination. For we find him first going out with hasty Arab violence to gratify by lawless bloodshed his old grudge of many years against his twin brother; and then, when stopped from this by a direct prohibition from the Highest, suddenly melted by the abjectness of that brother’s submission, and the sight of the unprotected weakness of the women and their children, until he embraces him whom he had meant to slay, and weeps, as the uncertainty of the varying tide of his feelings lords it over him, in a paroxysm of tenderness upon his neck.

Here, then, is the character, and these are the events, which are taken by God the Holy Ghost for the especial warning of us Christians. For this is their application:—“Looking diligently lest any man fail of the grace of God, lest any root of bitterness springing up trouble you, and thus many be defiled; lest there be amongst you any fornicator or profane person, as Esau, who for one morsel of meat sold his birthright^a.” And now what are our lessons from all this? To gather these perfectly, let us first see what certainly is not taught us in them. Certainly, then, we are not to gather hence that any true penitent can turn to God and be rejected of Him. This were to contradict every page of God’s Word, every gracious promise of our Lord, every assurance of His love, every most blessed truth taught us from His cross. This were to stamp on the Epistle to the Hebrews the brand of the dark Novatian heresy, and to strike it there-

^a Heb. xii.

fore out of the canon of God's truth. No, brethren, there is no such intimation here: and we must not, to fill up the terrible picture of final reprobation, with its awful and most necessary warnings, run the slightest risk of any one drawing from this history so dangerous an error. Esau's rejection was no such contradiction of God's love as the rejection of any one weeping penitent upon earth would surely be. For, first, as we have seen, there is about Esau's very cry itself, loud and bitter as it was, no sign of true penitence; and next, when he uttered it, so far as that which he had then lost is concerned, his day of probation was already over, his time of trial closed, his hour of judgment come. There is, doubtless, as we shall see hereafter, a true counterpart of this before every impenitent man, with horrors aggravated above any which waited upon Esau's sentence, as far as time is exceeded by eternity, and temporal disadvantage by the death of the enduring soul. But there is not one word in it to make any one, who, in this his day of grace, turns to the Lord, and cries to Him for cleansing and for pardon, doubt the full certainty of a most gracious acceptance by Him who suffered the woman that was a sinner to wash His blessed feet with her tears, and to wipe them with the hair of her head.

This, then, certainly is not the lesson which is taught us here: but just as certainly it is, that we, too, may cast away God's mercy to us; that we, the true children of promise, bred in the family of one greater than Isaac—that we, the inheritors of a birthright greater far than Jacob sought for or Esau despised—that we, the children of God's grace, may reject His grace, and cast profanely from us our more blessed birthright. Such awful cases the experience of every parish priest has, I suppose, brought before him. I have seen them, and have trembled. I have seen the fearful paroxysms of a loud and violent despair. I have seen what is more awful

still, the obstinate sinner calmly, deliberately, determinately put from himself the hope of salvation, and declare that in a few hours he shall be in hell. And so indeed it must be. For if this were not so, what could the warning mean, "Looking diligently lest any man fail of the grace of Christ."

Surely it must mean that the time of hopeless lamentation will come to every obstinate despiser of God's grace; that His Spirit does not always strive with any man—that there is a limit to the trial of every man; that when that awful moment reaches any man, whether it be at death, or whether it be, as surely it may be, before, though when it does so is known only to that God who seeth all things, even the secrets of the hearts which He has made—when His free Spirit has been finally grieved, when He has withdrawn from us His long-resisted strivings, that then repentance is impossible; that then the heart is given over to its own wickedness, and that it is therefore necessarily, and for ever, the prey of its own guilt. Oh horrible thought, my beloved in Christ, that any one for whom He died, any one who had a place in His Church, perhaps a share in His blessed Sacraments, who has been visited by His grace, upon whom the light of heaven has once fallen, who has lived in the tent of His chosen ones, and been borne upon the knee beside His Saints,—that such an one should be given up for ever to the full possession of evil, and the evil one, with all that such a miserable casting away implies. For what does not that one thought include? Moral and spiritual evil shews, even here upon earth, in every one whom it has thoroughly possessed, as loathsome and horrible. The grossness, the brutality, the malice, the treachery, the falseness, the despair of such a soul, when, from time to time, it reveals to-day the secrets of the black abyss which is forming within it, make us absolutely shudder with disgust and horror; and yet the worst exhibition of the worst soul on earth can be as nothing to one thoroughly

and for ever possessed with and surrounded by unmixed and unmitigated evil. For we cannot calculate the amount of restraint exerted on the very worst here, both by the influences of good around him, by the very marred image of God which he yet retains, and by the last remaining breath of God's Spirit, striving, though it may be for the very last time, within him. The gloom of the obscurest sky is as nothing to the blackness of that Egyptian night from which every ray of light was so perfectly banished that it was "a darkness which could be felt:" and what must be the raging horror, the foul corruption, the deadly hate, the utter falsehood, the unutterable loathsomeness, the black despair of that soul from which every remaining restraint of grace is utterly removed; which is steeped in guilt, and which roams for ever in the hell to which it has condemned itself, in an atmosphere of perfect wickedness, with no companions save those who, according to their terrible capacities, fill up each one in their own spiritual nature the same accomplished measure of perfected wickedness! Can we not, as we gaze with awe upon the fearful picture, see in some measure why this doom is irreversible? For must it not of necessity happen that the very perfection of this miserable wickedness sets the seal of hopeless continuance upon such spiritual wretchedness? For such a spiritual being with such a nature must hate the good, must, above all, hate supremely, God, the All-good; must see in Him the highest and most absolute conceivable contradiction of itself, and so must recoil infinitely from Him, and in recoiling from Him must choose the evil with an ever-renewed iteration and ever-increased intensity of choice. Nor does the perfection of the misery which such a soul endures at all incline it to any breath of penitence; it only deepens the blackness and the malignity of its despair. There is nothing in itself purifying in suffering. It is only, so to speak, by an accident of our position here in a world of temptation, under

the action of God's Spirit, that suffering benefits us, by turning us from the evil or unworthy objects on which we are disposed to set our affections, and so by leaving the heart empty and bare, that the winning influences of God's grace may enter into it and turn us to Him.

But mere anguish, as a contradiction of the nature God has given us, is not an elevating, but a deteriorating influence, and of itself tends to destruction. It naturally stirs up resistance; and when that resistance is joined to hopelessness, to despair; and through despair to hatred, and the blackest malignity: to hatred to others; to the wretched round the lost soul, who remind him of, stir up, and aggravate his own wretchedness; to those who are free from his misery, because they remind him of the lower measures of peace he once tasted, and of which he, as they do now, might have come to know and enjoy the full perfection, but have lost it for ever; and so, through hating the good, the tormented soul passes on to hate supremely the God who gave it being, who would have won it to happiness, who loved it, who gave His dear Son to die for it, who wrought in it, in its day of grace and trial, of His great love, by His good Spirit, who would have been its portion, but whom it rejected to make itself the lost, miserable, hateful, hating devil it has become. And as such a spirit hates all around it, so too does it come to hate itself; seeing even distinctly its own hatefulness, and yet not wishing to be other than it is; because, hating itself, it hates goodness more, and gnawing its own tongue in its misery, it yet curses God with a deeper curse than it curses its own miserable self. Here is the agony of an "exceeding loud and bitter cry," of which the extremest anguish, which found its utterance in Esau's lamentation, was but the faint forecast and evanescent shadow. For here is the howling curse of a spirit framed to comprehend and possess God, which has cast away its birth-right of eternal life, and knows that it has done so. Surely,

in the sight of this extremest night of suffering, we can understand something of the energy of this warning which the Holy Ghost has dictated to us,—“Looking diligently, lest any man fail of the grace of God ^b.”

But if we would learn one true lesson from this portion of God's Word, we must not only note the general warning of looking diligently lest we fall from God's grace, but we must see further against what special forms of evil this warning is peculiarly directed. And indeed, for many here, as everywhere, this is a lesson needing very signally to be learned. For remember what we have already seen to have been Esau's circumstances and Esau's trial. Born to the inheritance of a certain birthright, exercising, as to his first title to it, no volition regarding it; having centred in his own person the mysterious privileges which ordinarily belonged to the first-born son of the heir of promise,—he cast these away; not from special or marked depravity of character, but from yielding to the temptations of appetite; not, probably, at the moment, seeing the full amount of what he did, having but an indistinct perception of the faint murmur of some future loss, to which the nearness, the loudness, and the importunity of a present strong desire sufficed wholly to deafen his ear. This one special attribute of sensuality is clearly shadowed forth in this example: we see its direct tendency to lead to delaying repentance until true repentance is impossible. For its gratifications fill for a season, and occupy the degraded soul. Thus the first drawings of the blessed Spirit are resisted, His first tender motions on the soul are quenched; and it is in yielding to these, instead of resisting them, that there is the only possibility of any true repentance. So it was with Esau, when, under the overmastering impulse of a sensual temptation, he was led to cast all good away,—for “thus Esau despised his birthright.”

^b Heb. xii. 15.

And now listen once more to the application of this warning made to us by God the Holy Ghost :—"Looking diligently lest any man fail of the grace of God ; lest any root of bitterness springing up trouble you, and thereby many be defiled ; lest there be any fornicator, or profane person, as Esau, who for one morsel of meat sold his birthright."

Surely the application is too explicit to be missed. Is not the warning plain against exactly that whole class of sins of the real guilt of which the world takes least account? Is it not as much as saying that indulged sensuality does build up barriers against true repentance, which are all but impassable? Does it not meet the man possessed, by natural endowment, of high spirits, of frankness, of cheerfulness, of all that makes him a popular companion,—with strong passions, with great powers of enjoyment,—who flings himself freely into life, is the leader of a set, and, from there being a certain look of generosity about his vices, is lauded perhaps for his unselfishness ; who has naturally a far more attractive character than the less courageous, less spirited, less frank, more self-conscious, more self-watchful man beside him?—does it not meet this man in his hours of sensual temptation, and say, Thou hast a birthright, beware of despising it, beware of bartering it? Does it not say to him, "Thou, too, art a son of Abraham ;" yea, and more, "Thou art a son of Christ:" without thy choice, before thy knowledge, of God's mere love and mercy, that blessed privilege was made thine. His love yearned over thine infancy, His Spirit has striven with thy youth, His care is watching over thee now, and thou, too, art tempted to barter these inestimable blessings for the mess of pottage. In thee, too, appetite craves for indulgence ; before thine eyes a sensuous fancy paints her glowing pictures of the mad delight of gratified desire, of the feast, of the revel, of the impure orgy, of the satisfied sense. All these she sets before thee, and thy

spirit, faint often and weary in this struggle, whispers to thee, Lo, I die in this abstinence; and what good shall this birthright do me? Oh *then* beware,—for then is the tempter nearest, closest, most dangerous. Then, under the form of what he whispers to thee, is a common practice, a slight evil, the yielding to an irresistible temptation; then is he tempting thee, too, after this example of the old profaneness of Esau, to despise thy birthright. For so, indeed, it is. That birthright is the indwelling in thee, for Christ's sake, into whom thou hast been baptised, of God the Holy Ghost. Thy birthright is God's presence with thee,—His restraints, His suggestions, His divine power working within thee for thy purification and renewal. It is the power which thou mayest daily win of Him, of walking with Christ here on earth. It is the certainty of being His for ever. It is the assurance that He will never leave thee nor forsake thee. It is the being kept from that hour which is coming upon all the evil world. It is the having His work of love perfected within thee, in the brightening hope, the growing purity, the increasing calm, the ripening graces of a soul which He is fitting for His heavenly presence. It is the gift of perseverance, the might of faith, the fire of love. It is joy in death and rapture in eternity. It is the sight, even here, through clouds and mists, of that face of His which, even through clouds and mists, is a more blessed sight than any which the world can offer thee. It is the full sight of that face of love, the full knowledge, and enjoyment, and possession of that love of His which passeth knowledge in the unveiled presence of thy Lord throughout eternity. *This* is thy birthright, and it is this that in very deed thou, too, art tempted to barter for the miserable morsel of a satisfied appetite. For so it is: every separate act of allowed sensuality clogs thy soul, grieves the Holy Spirit of God, withdraws thee from Christ, fetters thee to the earth, is a rending

backward thy redemption; is making thee less a child of grace, more a child of earth. It is specially hindering thee in the great work of repentance; it is leading thee to defer it; cheating thee with the promise of present indulgence, and some future change; and so persuading thee to put off repenting till repentance is impossible.

Nor can you tell that in any one of these allowed instances of sensual indulgence you may not actually sell your birthright. It is the very secret of the power of the temptation, that in each separate instance it looks so inconsiderable in its future consequences, compared with the pressing urgency of the present desire. It is the gusty impulsiveness of your nature which exposes you so certainly to the danger. You become profane without knowing it; you meant but to gratify appetite, and lo, for appetite you have bartered your soul. Here, then, is God's warning to you. He sets, from the beginning, the end before you. He shews you what such conduct really is, and whither it must lead you. He lets you hear the loud and bitter cry—He reminds you that when his day of grace was past, he who had profanely sold his birthright found no place for repentance, though when it was too late he sought it carefully with tears—and He reminds you wherein is your safety; it is in *looking diligently*—not in a passing desire to be better than you are, not in an indolent, unreal wish to be holy, but in *looking diligently*. And what must this imply? Surely, first, guarding against the occasions, the provocatives, and the presence of temptation. Who but a madman will scatter sparks within that magazine, where the lighting down of a single spark may be death to all around? And yet do not those who know how easily the fierceness of appetite is awoke within them, continually allow themselves to read books, and gaze on sights, and indulge thoughts which tend directly to kindle all into a destructive explosion. Here, then, must be the beginning

of diligence. And then, further, will not he who looks diligently lest he fail of God's grace, not only keep thus habitually afar from temptation, but will he not also examine himself often as to what is indeed the condition of his soul before his God? Will he not at such a time as this bring specially under review the whole course of his life,—his habitual indulgences, lest haply in any he has unawares given to rebellious appetite too loose a rein? Will he not at such time anxiously find modes for gaining, by strict self-denial, a firmer hand, and putting a yoke of more regular observation upon his own desires? Above all, will he not seek by more earnest prayer for grace, and increased communion with Christ, the growing purification of his soul?

My brethren, let these words of warning ring at this season in our ear, lest any man fail of the grace of God. All our salvation is of His grace, all conquest of sin is His work within us; all good within us is of His great love—is in spite of our resistance; and yet it is true, also, that His grace will not save us unless we yield ourselves to it, unless we work with it, aye, and that diligently;—"to our own security, our own fidelity is needful." It is God who keeps us; but He keeps us by giving us diligence, not by upholding us without it. Oh let us look diligently, lest any of us fail of His mighty grace. Yea, and if in time past we have not kept watch against sin, if we have let indolence, or sloth, or sensuality triumph over us and threaten our destruction, only the more earnestly let us seek for cleansing in His blood, and renewal by His grace; and then, as men in very deed flying for our lives, let us arise and run the race still set by Him, and it may be for the last time, before us, lest in the mighty coming day of judgment, when repentance has become to us impossible, it be written over us to our eternal condemnation, as over the sensual son of Isaac,—“Thus Esau despised his birthright.”

SERMON VI.

THE REPENTANCE OF JUDAS.

BY

WALTER KERR, LORD BISHOP OF SALISBURY.

THE REPENTANCE OF JUDAS.

A SERMON,

PREACHED IN

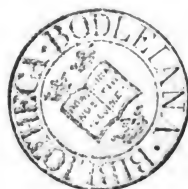
THE CHURCH OF ST. MARY-THE-VIRGIN,
OXFORD,

ON WEDNESDAY, FEB. 19, 1858.

BY

WALTER KERR,
LORD BISHOP OF SALISBURY.

OXFORD,
AND 377, STRAND, LONDON:
JOHN HENRY AND JAMES PARKER.
M DCCCLVIII.



A SERMON,

&c.

St. MATTHEW xi. 28.

“Come unto Me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.”

WE are this day, my brethren, keeping the festival of one of whom we know thus much:—

St. Matthias had companied with the apostles all the time that the Lord Jesus had gone in and out among them, and when Judas had, by transgression, fallen from the ministry and apostleship, he was specially marked out by God to be numbered amongst the eleven apostles, and was consequently ordained to be with them a witness of our Lord's resurrection.

This is indeed a very scanty record of one who is set before us in such very distinct relief in this most eventful crisis of the work committed by our Saviour to His Church, and we seem by the very strangeness of this circumstance to be carried at once to that general truth which St. Matthias' case illustrates, namely, that oftentimes, or perhaps I might say generally, God in His Providence places a veil either over the whole life, or over that portion of it which would be most interesting to us, of those who have been, as His instruments, our greatest benefactors.

But I cannot stay to dwell even for a moment on this reflection to-day. Other thoughts are now filling my heart, and I would fain endeavour to communicate these to you,

and through them draw your hearts into sympathy with mine.

The Church of God having selected for the Gospel of this day that portion of Holy Scripture which contains the words of my text, seems to have been able to tell us for certain one more thing about this blessed Saint, and this is, that the burden of the new Apostle's teaching was an invitation to come to Jesus, and a promise that all who came and took the yoke of Jesus upon them should find rest.

The invitation and promise had been given by Jesus Himself, and the Apostle, who represented His Lord, and spoke in His Name, and ministered by His power, carried that all-gracious invitation and promise to all his hearers; and when doing so, must have found in his own special circumstances that which made his witness the more emphatic and earnest, and which strengthened his purpose to tell out his message with all the power of persuasion, and which kindled every affection of his heart, both with the holy fire of love for his Saviour, and with pity and compassion for those who were labouring and heavy laden.

When St. Matthias invited men to come to Jesus, and promised those who would accept the invitation rest in Jesus, the figure of that man who, after hanging himself, had fallen headlong and burst asunder in the midst, and whose bishopric St. Matthias had taken, must have risen up before him, and have supplied him a fresh plea wherewith to persuade his hearers not to turn aside God's purposes of mercy towards them. St. Matthias could appeal not only to the misery of that state in which they were, and to the still greater misery of that state in which they would be if they came not to Jesus, and to the blessedness of those who sought to lay down their burden at the foot of the Cross, and to the future glory of those who, having found rest in Jesus here, departed this life in peace and hope,—but he could also enforce the

fear of such misery, and stimulate the desire for these riches of Christ, by setting before them the example of Judas, and so gathering words of warning from the sin of Judas, and the despair of Judas, and the end of Judas,—his going to his own place. “My apostleship,” St. Matthias might have said to his hearers, “carries me up to the scene of my predecessor’s death, and I would carry you there with me, that by the sight of the terrors of his end you may learn to accept that invitation which he rejected.”

But I may seem to be speaking as if St. Matthias was no longer pleading with men to come to Jesus, whereas it is the very purpose of the appointment of this festival, that though this Apostle is dead, he should yet, by the record given of him, speak even to us of this generation: and this purpose of our Church I would this evening endeavour to carry out. I would use the despair and death of Judas as a means of persuading you all, my brethren, to come to Christ, to draw nigh to Him, however great your present distance may be from Him, and to draw nigher and nigher to Him, if your communion with Him has already, by God’s great goodness, become close and enduring. My object is to convince you that whatever be your labour, whatever be the load which is oppressing you, you may find rest in your crucified Saviour; or rather, not so much to convince you of what you may do as to stir up your souls to come at once, this very Lent, this very night, and to seek and receive without delay the gifts which Jesus offers to you.

There may be some very desperately wicked persons in this present congregation; indeed, I trust there are such, because I am sure that though they may not be within this church, there are many such not far off without it; and I would have such as these hear me place in the very front of my address the assurance that the terms of the invitation are wide enough to include their case, and that the grace promised

is of power enough to remedy their condition. Judas did not stay away from Jesus because he was not invited to come to Him; he was not crushed by his burden because Jesus did not offer to bear it for him. No: Judas had a part and lot in his Lord's invitation; and had he accepted it, he might, maybe, have retained his apostleship, and most surely would he have found peace in believing. And having said this, I need not add another word to bear my witness to you all that I believe no exception is made of any case. Judas' case was not one of exclusion, but of refusal. Though invited, he did not come: he despaired, and through his despair forfeited all portion in the mercies of his God—"Judam perditorem non tam scelus quod commisit, quam indulgentiæ desperatio fecit penitus interire*."

In acting upon the conviction that God's mercies in Christ were not for such as he was, he shewed that he had no power of receiving the witness that the love and mercy of God knew no limits. He set his own sense of his sin against the truth of Him who had invited all to come to Him, without exception. He was prevented by the folly of his own wicked heart from giving the right answer to the merciful challenge of his God,—“Have I any pleasure at all that the wicked should die?”

Judas seemed, indeed, to have in his spiritual state one element of repentance—he was full of sorrow; but that sorrow had in it no faith, no hope, no love for Him whom he had betrayed; and so, though he was able to lift up the veil which had hitherto concealed his guilt from the eye of his soul, he was unable to draw aside the thick curtain which entirely obscured his Almighty Saviour's gentleness, and long-suffering and tender mercies. The only power he still possessed was that of adding sin to sin. Having betrayed innocent blood, he was able also to deny the virtue of it.

* L. Justiniani, p. 38, 2, 70.

The betrayer of his Master filled up the measure of his iniquity by the worst of all sins, desperation.

Nor did this malignant sin fail to shew its nature: the desperation of Judas led him to destroy himself.

And here I must remark, that though the fearful issue of this sin in suicide is, thanks be to our merciful God, a very exceptional one, and has even tended to make people conclude that the offence of Judas—his despairing, namely, of pardon—is, like that dreadful act in which it issued, of rare occurrence; the truth is, that such loss of faith, and hope and love—such despair—is far from being uncommon, and that so the subject of Judas' offence is one which has a very wide-spread interest and application. All who complain that when the words of eternal mercy reach them, "Come unto Me, and I will give you rest," they have no eyes to discern the lovely features of the Speaker, and no ears to recognise in His voice the voice of the Son of Mary, (and is not this the more or less frequent complaint of most of us?) know what it is to fear for themselves the state of Judas, and must feel that any true statement of the causes and remedies of despair is an answer to questions which they have themselves often raised.

It is such an answer that I would now give you, my brethren, in the hope that you may be helped by such teaching to be partakers in all the fulness of the grace which is in Christ Jesus, and that by the comfort, and the peace, and the joy which you shall thus receive from Him, you may learn to master any temptations to despair by the exercise of greater love for Him, your Lord and Saviour.

The question is, how comes it that, in spite of the revelations which God has made of His readiness to welcome back the sinner, and to blot out his transgression, any man can persuade himself that his case is not within the scope of such revelations? In answer to this question, I would say that

there are many causes which would either singly, or in combination with one another, produce such a result. For example, here is a man who, through moral depravity or habits of godless indifference, has become utterly alienated from all communion with God. There is at present no affinity between his soul and his God. He does not possess either any ear so fashioned as to hear God's words of mercy, or any eye so endued with power of vision as to discern his Saviour, or any hand qualified to reach forth to receive God's gifts. All power of communion and intercourse between this sinner and the Saviour is cut off, and so he can but draw one conclusion in the hour of his need,—and that is, that he has no part or lot in the matter.

He has lost the gift of faith, and so all God's words and deeds of mercy are to him as if they were not. It is to faith that God discovers Himself, and that he has not.

But there are many other causes which lead to the same end, though by a less direct course; there are many other states of our moral and spiritual condition, very short of this utter alienation from God, which unfit a man for the vision of a God of love and mercy.

But as it is quite impossible for me to give in one sermon any account of all these causes of despair, I will briefly describe to you a few of them, and will take those first which the history of Judas seems specially to point out.

Judas, when he came to think of his sin, and to measure its guilt, must have heard a stern accuser pleading against him at the bar of his conscience—"You did not commit this act of wickedness without warning."

Those words of his Lord and Master, "Have not I chosen you twelve, and one of you is a devil?" must have started up in his soul. And the expression of unquestioning certainty which marked the countenance of Jesus as He thus revealed to Judas the secret wickedness of his heart, and which

should have turned him away in terror from the course on which he was treading, must, when he repented himself, have risen up before him, to aggravate and intensify the sense of the enormity of his guilt, and so to bring him to despair.

By a law of most righteous retribution, warnings which are given in mercy become, if neglected, instruments of punishment. And so, my brethren, if your conscience ever reproves you, or if the Word of God, however addressed to you, "pierces to the dividing asunder of your soul and spirit," or if God in His providence deals with you by way either of correction or encouragement, beware, I beseech you, of not learning those lessons of heavenly wisdom; for if you do thus neglect such teaching, then, at that hour at any rate, (if not before), when the summons from your God reaches you, "Thy soul is required of thee," the remembrance of all such gracious communion of your God with your soul, will only increase the difficulty of believing that there is still mercy for one who has so oftentimes thought scorn of the offer of it. You will despair because God has warned you, and you have slighted His warnings.

And supposing that these warnings have made very special appeals to your heart; supposing that they have been clothed with circumstances which could not but awaken every dormant emotion of the inner man; and that when your heart has been thus stirred within you, and has been agitated with hopes, and fears, with the energisings of faith, and the purposes of love, you allowed this precious season of excitement of holy feeling to pass away, and to give place again to the dull calm of an unimpassioned, unawakened, insensible conscience,—it is easy to conclude, even on moral grounds, and independently of all questions of the judgment of your heavenly Father, whom you have so slighted, that the heart, the emotions of which have been thus disregarded, will answer

less readily to all future appeals, and will yield itself more reluctantly to any future drawings of God's grace and providence, and will be more likely to resist the quickening and genial influences of any rays of the Sun of Righteousness which may in mercy reach it.

Thus the forbearing conduct of our blessed Lord to Judas, after Judas had learnt from his Master's fearful words, "One of you is a devil," that Jesus knew what evil thoughts were taking hold of his heart, must have awakened in the breast of Judas on each occasion when our Lord thus dealt so considerately and tenderly with him, some feelings of admiration and love for his Lord and his God.

So, too, when, after washing the feet of the rest of His disciples, our Lord said in the hearing of Judas, "ye are clean, *but not all*," and then drew nigh to Judas, and washed and wiped his feet, it is not possible to believe that a question was not all the while claiming from Judas' heart an answer,—"How shall I do this wickedness?"

And though he silenced the questioner at that moment, it was only to give him a still more favourable opportunity for repeating his question, when Jesus prophesied in the deep sorrows of His heart, "He that eateth bread with Me hath lifted up his heel against Me. Verily, verily, I say unto you, that one of you shall betray Me!" Yea, and the appeal for an answer was not only thus made to every remains of love and pity which might still be in the heart of Judas, but also to his fears; for our Lord, in the same spirit of meek forbearance, desiring to warn him against persevering in his fearful course, and so hardening his heart against all the remonstrances made to it, said in his hearing, "Woe to that man, by whom the Son of Man is betrayed; good were it for that man if he had never been born."

We may find, then, a sufficient solution of the problem, why Judas despaired, instead of seeking rest in Jesus from

the labour and anguish of his soul, by placing in the balance against his Lord's all-gracious promise the exceeding weight of those bitter thoughts which gathered their power from all that scorn with which he had time after time treated the exquisite forbearance of Jesus, and from all those stubborn efforts he had successfully made to resist the repeated appeals which Jesus had made both to his love and his fears.

But, my brethren, such a hardening of heart as the notices in Holy Scripture of Judas set before us, may not seem so strange when I have stated to you the whole case thus revealed to us.

If you would have a correct view of the position of man as a moral agent in this world, you must, however fearful may be the vision, place close to the man a person—a spiritual being—one of whose existence, power, and constant interference the Holy Scriptures plainly speak. The being thus standing at man's right hand is that tempter of our first mother and the second Adam, Satan.

When thus standing by Judas, he put it into Judas' heart to betray our Lord, and then afterwards he "*entered* into him," took full possession of him, and by his indwelling put a constraint on all his heart's affections and fears, and nerved him to execute his wicked purpose, and then persuaded him to add sin to sin,—the blackest sin of all, the sin of desperation, to the guilt of having been the betrayer of innocent blood.

But if such is the record of the part which Satan had in the wickedness of Judas, remember, I beseech you, my brethren, that this record is written for your learning. Judas, when Satan, as he stood at his right hand, put evil thoughts into his heart, warned us of what is our own position of peril. Judas, when Satan entered into him, and when the words of Jesus were thus accomplished in him, "*One of you is a devil,*" warned us of what even a child of God may become. Satan is ever about us, in all our

duties, and in all our interests, and in our whole conversation. We are not cut off from his presence and influence, even in the house of prayer, or even when we kneel before the holy Table, and are there in closest communion with the functions of our High-Priest in heaven. I, for one, know not—and you would all, I am sure, adopt my confession—whether I, this very night, since I entered this house of God, have escaped the influence of that poisonous breath of death, with which Satan destroys the springs of faith, and hope, and love.

But as we make the confession, we are cheered with the counsel and promise, “Resist the devil, and he will flee from you;” yea, we seem to be carried by the Spirit of our God into the wilderness, to be schooled by our holy Lord how to fight as He did, and to master that strong one, Satan. We are assured that, though Satan be ever “seeking whom he may destroy,” we may, if “sober and vigilant,” escape the power of our adversary.

And are you, my brethren, watchful, are you keeping your bodies in subjection, that you may watch the better? are you with a sober, well-regulated spirit, watching not only against Satan, but watching, observing, examining your own minds and hearts?

The soldier in this world’s warfare, who is well on his guard against his enemies, not only keeps his eyes on their approaches, but on his own defences; and so it must be with the soldier of the Cross.

You who are enlisted under the banners of Jesus must, if you would receive from Him, the Captain of your Salvation, the crown of victory, gain a true and accurate knowledge of your fitness for such warfare. Without such a knowledge of your spiritual state and condition, you cannot parry the assaults of the tempter; without it, the means of grace will not be channels to your souls of your Lord’s manifold gifts.

Or rather,—for such language as this does not adequately represent the necessity of such discipline,—those means which should be so helpful to you, will, if thus abused, only increase your want of power to escape from the evil one, and will make your weakness and inability to resist him the greater.

Judas again says to you, Take in due season, ere it be too late, warning from me. The Spirit witnesses to you of me, that “after I took the sop, Satan entered into me.”

These are indeed, my brethren, pregnant words, and I earnestly press upon you all to endeavour to draw out from them the abundant fulness of their meaning. Remember that this teaching of Judas refers specially to the blessed Sacrament of His Body and Blood whom he betrayed. Quicken also all your attempts at self-examination, and your practising such other spiritual exercises as may help you to be meet guests at the holy Table, by well weighing those words of godly caution with which your Church, with special reference to this act of Judas, fences off her great ordinance from all profaners,—“lest, after the taking of that holy Sacrament, the devil enter into you, as he entered into Judas, and fill you full of all iniquities, and bring you to destruction both of body and soul.” There is not, I believe, a surer road to despair than a careless profaning of the great mystery of the Sacrament of our Lord’s Body and Blood.

And here I would further remind you, that the indulgence in any one sin may bring you to the profane state of Judas. If in your self-examination and confession you pass by any single sin, and so do not try to root it out, that sin will spread itself over the whole of your spiritual being, and alienate it altogether from your God. It was, in the case of Judas, the sin of covetousness, and there is no sin of a more malignant power than this one: but the indulgence of any other sin may have the same effect; it will prepare, as it

were, a welcome in your heart for Satan ; it will enable its guilty owner to take the sop, and at the same moment to cherish the purpose of betraying Him who Himself ministers this His greatest gift to His disciples ; and it may do all this without the cognisance of any eye but that of the all-seeing God.

The companions of Judas did not discover that there was a deadly disease eating out his powers of spiritual life. He certainly professed great regard for those who were, he knew, dearest to the heart of Jesus, namely, the poor ; and the loving token which he chose for distinguishing the person of his Master when he betrayed Him, almost forces us to believe that his bearing towards his Master was very like, in its outward aspect, that of the disciple whom Jesus loved.

I do not for a moment think, my brethren, that hypocrisy is at all a characteristic sin of this place. In a sense, indeed, we are all guilty of it, for we all profess more than we do ; but I am not now speaking of a sin of infirmity, but of a wilful, habitual sin ; and from this sin the manly, sincere, open character of Englishmen revolts. And this character, which is such a safeguard to us, is strengthened and developed by our institutions ; and, to speak of this place, by the great liberty enjoyed by the younger members of it ; and by the sense of responsibility thereby fostered in them.

But still be very careful, I entreat you, that you do not cherish its very smallest beginnings ; and nothing will more assist you in thus stamping out the first spark of this deadly fire, than to be very unreserved and open with your tutors. If they do not *all* stand to you in the same relation as the parish priest does to his parishioners, yet many, nay, most of them, do so, and open relations of confidence with all of them are good and profitable, and the special aid which some of them cannot give you, you will, I am sure, easily obtain (if you seek it) from others in the same college.

Had Judas exposed the sore and festering wounds to his Lord and Master, he would (why should we doubt it?) have been saved from the betrayal of our Lord, and so from that crime of despair in which his betrayal of our Lord ended; and it is still the agonising cry of many,—and many who have no ears in the hour of death to receive the message of eternal mercy, “Thy sins be forgiven thee,”—that it is their past hypocrisy, and their concealment of their sins, that has thus deprived them of their hearing.

There is only one other point in which I would have Judas speak to all of you words of warning—against the peril and sin of despair.

I think it is very probable that Judas fully believed that our blessed Lord would, after His betrayal, deliver Himself out of the hands of His enemies, and that so his own evil deed would not work out the malicious designs of the Scribes and Pharisees.

Now, if this be so, what is the lesson Judas here teaches us? The following is one, at any rate, of the shapes in which this lesson might be addressed to us.

Never stifle the sense of moral responsibility, never substitute for obedience to its plain laws any vague, presumptuous thought about God’s power and will.

Man’s responsibility and God’s decrees are two classes of truths which extend themselves in parallel lines. They will never clash, never disturb one another’s course, if you are content to place yourselves with unquestioning faith on both these lines; but the moment you try to make them converge to one another, or to limit the action of the one by the other, you will be forced to blot out of God’s most holy Word many of its clearest revelations.

You will, for example, cramp the energies of your love for the brethren by hard questions about their state as written in God’s decrees; or, on the other hand, in your works of

love, in your strivings to serve God, and to do His will, you will lack that mighty support which St. Paul drew for the Romans from the truth of God's eternal predestination, and which confessors and martyrs have found to give them nerve and consolation both in the prospect and the endurance of their tortures.

It is sometimes well to look steadily at an extreme abuse of a true principle, that we may be deterred by the grossness of the caricature from tampering in any way with a principle of truth, and so I will give you an example of such abuse.

I read the other day, in a recently published Lecture, that in the Albigensian crusade, at the storming of a town, where the number of the slain is set down at fifty thousand, the command was issued, "Slay them all: God will know His own." Every one would at once admit that this was a fearfully presumptuous way of setting aside a clear claim of mercy by an unwarrantable appeal to God's will and power. But, my brethren, you yourselves will be often tempted to similar, though, may be, to far less gross violations of the rules by which God would guide your conduct. If this were not so, why, when God speaks to the point so plainly in the Bible, are there any difficulties about man's responsibility and God's decrees, about sacramental grace, and the power and sovereignty of God? Only let us receive God's revelations as His, as expressions of an infinite mind to our poor weak finite understandings; let us strive to come to Him as little children, and then we shall avoid all those perplexities and entanglements of hard questions which so often end in weakness of faith, and sometimes, we know, in sheer despair.

There are many more causes of this sad condition, which I should gladly set before you, but time will not allow me to go beyond those that seem to me specially connected with Judas. Were there not this hindrance, I should have en-

deavoured to connect this state of mind with many infirmities which beset us all;—such, for example, as spiritual dryness, a want of the gushings forth of a feeling and contrite heart—a morbid sense of shortcomings—the habit of looking too much to our own state, and not enough to the work of our blessed Lord, whether to that part of it which He perfected on the cross, or to that part which He is carrying on in heaven—some physical weakness and natural gloominess of character, and the pressure of outward trials and temptations on this enfeebled and low state of the spiritual condition and physical constitution. These are all circumstances which require the advice of a good physician of souls, to prevent their drawing us on to the slough of despond, to the conviction that when Jesus said, “Come unto Me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest,” our labours and our burdens were not included, and that His gift of rest is reserved for other necessities than ours.

And have not these physicians of souls many and many arguments with which to meet the difficulty, and to set aside the above conclusion?

Why, the very conduct of any good and merciful man may be appealed to as a sure token that such a conclusion is not right. The prodigal son, if he returns home to his father, has good hope of pardon: and why? because his father has still in his nature the remnants of that likeness in which man was first created; yea, and is, as a Christian father, being renewed in that very likeness: and so, when this father forgives his son, his act of forgiveness, as it were, says for him, I am merciful, because God is merciful.

If this argument is only fairly set forth and pressed upon a sinner's soul, I believe that there is in it enough to rekindle even the last embers of his expiring faith. But should it fail, there is still left the whole storehouse of God's holy Word, which contains revelation upon revelation of God's

willingness to pardon, and of the great difficulty that our God has in giving up any of His people. Even when He seems to be on the very point of pouring out the vials of His wrath, His repentings, we are told, are kindled together—He will not make Ephraim like Admah—He will not execute the fierceness of His anger. And why? because “He is God, and not man.”

Or does the thought of the decrees of God harass a believer’s soul, and make him well-nigh despair? No revelation of God’s sovereign will can blank the revelation of the overflowings of His heart of most tender mercy and love for sinners. God reveals Himself in sundry ways and in divers manners to meet the several conditions of those whom His revelations reach, and there is often a marked purpose of mercy in the very juxtaposition of these different portions of truth. Thus the words of my text, and their unlimited invitation to all sinners, follow immediately after the statement which our blessed Lord made of His sovereign will and power. “Neither knoweth any man the Father, save the Son, and he to whomsoever the Son will reveal Him.”

Another remedy for despair may be found in God’s past dealings with us. The recollection of all these may indeed, and often does, aggravate the sense that all is lost, and that there is no longer any ground of hope. But the object of a wise physician of souls will be to lead his patient to any clear view of God as a God of mercy, which He may have vouchsafed to him in His past dealings with him. If my spiritual guide can thus enable me to trace in my past life tokens of the love of my Saviour for me; if I can observe, under his direction, such marks of the loving forbearance of my Lord as even Judas might have seen; if I can but trace upon the countenance of Jesus that same trouble and distress with which Judas might have seen that his Lord contemplated his sin and death, I think I shall be within the reach of some

further discovery of purposes of mercy for me; I shall feel in my heart a godly motion, which will soon, I believe, bring me on my knees before the throne of grace, and will express itself in words of humility and faith—"Father, I have sinned before heaven and in Thy sight, and am no more worthy to be called Thy son."

And then will not the thought of these means which have been used to restore me to faith and hope, of these ministrations of the Church of God to my soul, of this aid which I have, by God's grace, received from a brother-man, also help me to recognise the mercy of my God in His present dealings with me, and to see in them sure tokens that He has not cast me away utterly?

Of course there is another side to all this. It is as possible to indulge in false hopes as to give way to despair—"Et spes, et desperatio timenda in peccatis^b," but I shall not say anything about such presumptuous, ungrounded confidence. My object to-day is to warn you against falling into the last grievous sin of Judas; and not only to point out to you the causes of such sin, but also some of the remedies provided against it by our all-merciful God.

And at any rate, there are two things which it is quite safe to say, and which cannot foster these false hopes to which I have just alluded. The one is a direction to a place of sure refuge; the other regards the test and evidence of your having reached it. "*Toties confugiat peccator sub crucis Christi umbraculum, quoties desperationis jaculo se cognoscit transfixum^c.*" Whenever, my brethren, you are being tempted, from whatever cause it may be, to despair of your salvation, fly to the cross of Jesus. Keep, when there, your eyes fixed on that outward sign of your Lord's passion for you. Force upon the eye of your soul a vision of your Saviour's sufferings whilst He is hanging before you on that cross, and then,

^b Aug., t. iv. 1617. E.

^c L. Just., p. 82, 2, 73.

if you feel your heart, when you are standing there, softened with any feelings of love for Jesus, if but one single tear do but moisten that ground which is already wet with the blood and water which flowed from your Saviour's side, the triumph of despair is well-nigh past: God is merciful, and you have received grace to know it, and in thus *loving* Him for it, to receive the witness in yourself that you may rejoice in His salvation. "Quisquis divinam propitiam cupit habere munificentiam, ad ipsam accedat credendo, et de ipsa præsumat amando. Nam plenius amore quam timore capitur, et potius devotione quam mærore mulcetur^d."

Love is, indeed, the sure token that you have cut yourselves off from the company of Judas; and as you learn more of Christ, as you take with a more ready and glad mind His yoke upon you, you will love Him still more and more, and will realise in your close communion with Him that blessed state to which this holy season is set apart to lead you—a state of rest and peace—a Sabbath from the gnawings of conscience, and the aches of a burdened heart, and the fears of such an end of your discipleship as the despair of Judas.

^d L. Just., p. 91, 2, 1.

SERMON VII.

THE REPENTANCE OF JUDAS.

BY

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MARGARET PROFESSOR OF DIVINITY, AND CANON OF CHRIST CHURCH.

THE REPENTANCE OF JUDAS.

A SERMON,

PREACHED IN

THE CHURCH OF ST. EBBE,

OXFORD,

ON

WEDNESDAY, FEB. 24, 1858,

BY

CHARLES A. HEURTLEY, D.D.,

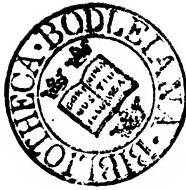
MARGARET PROFESSOR OF DIVINITY, AND CANON OF CHRIST CHURCH.

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JOHN HENRY AND JAMES PARKER.

M DCCC LVIII.



A SERMON,

&c.

ST. MATT. xxvii. 3—5.

“Then Judas, which had betrayed Him, when he saw that He was condemned, repented himself, and brought again the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and elders, saying, I have sinned in that I have betrayed the innocent blood. And they said, What is that to us? see thou to that. And he cast down the pieces of silver in the temple, and departed, and went and hanged himself.”

WHAT an appalling instance have we here of the miserable consequences of sin, such as they are sometimes experienced even in this world! Here is a man deliberately “selling himself to work evil,” obtaining the wages of his iniquity, and those wages no sooner obtained, than they become an intolerable curse. Satan, like a skilful angler, has concealed his hook under an alluring bait; the bait is seized, and forthwith the wretched prey writhes in agony. Well did the wise preacher exhort, in reference to one particular vice, “Look not on the wine when it is red, when it giveth his colour in the cup, when it moveth itself aright. At the last it biteth like a serpent, and stingeth like an adder.” Sooner or later, this is the case with sin of every description. “It biteth like a serpent,” it “stingeth like an adder;” and that not only in respect of other evil consequences which it draws after it, but also in respect of the bitter self-reproach, and anguish, and distress of mind, which necessarily follow upon it. It may be, indeed, that these are not felt, or not felt to any great extent, in the present life; but often they

• Prov. xxiii. 31, 32.

are so felt—felt even as Judas felt them;—and when they are, they exhibit a lively and most terrible representation of the misery which all must suffer in the next life who have not sought and found forgiveness through the blood of Jesus Christ. They are hell begun upon earth.

My object this evening will be to draw your attention pointedly to the state of mind which is set before us in the passage which I have just read,—Judas's Repentance, as it is called in the title whereby the subject prescribed to me for this sermon is designated. Yet before I enter upon this, it may be well to touch upon one or two other points, closely connected with it, and useful for the illustration of it, and scarcely less obvious or important, which the narrative brings before us.

I. Note first, then, the progress of evil in the case of this miserable man. We are not told, indeed, what passed in Judas's mind before his deed of treachery was done: but we know, independently of this part of his history, what was the weak point in his character. Covetousness was his besetting sin. There must have been a fair outside; how else could he have kept the company which he did? But his heart was swayed by the love of money, of which the Apostle says, that it "is the root of all evil." We cannot doubt, but that the prospect of making a gain by betraying his Master was a very alluring one. How delightful it would be to have so much money, as he might surely reckon upon, in his possession! How many things it would put within his reach, which he had long wished for! Or, what a pleasant addition it would make to the store already laid by as a provision against a future day of want! These thoughts, or such as these, in all probability, were often recurring to his mind; and the oftener they recurred, the stronger grew the force of the temptation; till at length Satan had nothing left to do but to take him, as it were, by the hand, and lead

him to his factors, the chief priests. Then the bargain is struck : his gracious and loving Master is bought and sold, and his own soul withal.

And now the hour agreed upon for his treachery is come. Does no misgiving cross his mind ? Does not his heart fail him ? Do not his knees tremble ? Does not his foot falter, as he leads the way in silence to the place where he expects to find his Master ? Likely enough they do. But the compact which he has made is, as it were, another cord drawn around him. He has now pledged himself to the chief priests ; he has passed his word : it is too late to go back ; he must finish what he has begun. Every step brings him nearer to the spot. He reaches it : the fatal kiss is given ; and Satan claims him as his own. All that remains is, to hold him fast. And Satan has two ready expedients for this : one, to deliver him over to utter recklessness ; to let him run on in a bold, dread-nought course of evil ; hardening his heart, searing his conscience, adding sin to sin, and treasuring up wrath against the day of wrath : the other,—and this is the one he chooses,—to plunge him into the depths of despair, to fill his mind with overwhelming horror, to shut out every gleam of hope, till at length life itself becomes an insupportable burthen.

Now it is true, my brethren, that this is an extreme case. The lines are broadly and strongly marked. There can be no mistake about them. But who can doubt but that it has many and many a parallel in ordinary life ?

Men suffer themselves to be caught by the prospect of some alluring gratification which falls in with their natural temper and disposition, whether that incline them to covetousness, as in Judas's case, or to lust and sensual indulgence, or whatever other form it assumes. They suffer their thoughts to dwell upon it ; they let it fill their imaginations ; it becomes a part of their minds. At length Satan provides a fit-

ting opportunity, and his wretched victim breaks down all barriers,—fear, shame, regard for character, for worldly prospects, what not?—and rushes headlong to his ruin. And then follows, either that hardening process just now referred to, whereby, through repeated disregard of its voice, conscience becomes utterly seared; or else, as in Judas's case, horror and remorse; unless, indeed, by God's great and undeserved mercy, the Holy Spirit awakens up the graces of faith, and hope, and penitence, and unfeigned contrition, and leads the sinner back to the Saviour, and through Him to the good and blessed ways of godliness and peace which he has forsaken.

Temptation, indeed, does not always present itself in the shape of something to be desired: many times it assumes an opposite form. Satan and their own evil hearts together represent their duty in such an unwelcome light, that men shrink from it, and, if the temptation prevails, actually leave it undone. This was the temptation by which Peter fell. Circumstances required him to confess his Master before men. In prospect, nothing had seemed more easy: but the hour of trial came: his courage failed him, he shrank from the sneer, he quailed before the ill opinion, or the imagination of the ill opinion, of the people among whom he found himself, or, it may be, he was afraid of graver consequences, and he denied his Lord. Had it not been for that Lord's gracious look, and the quickening, converting influences of His good Spirit which accompanied it, his last end might have been like Judas's, as the last end of many who have so fallen has been.

II. Let me turn for a moment to another lesson which this sad history brings before us.

When Judas, stricken with remorse, brought back his ill-gotten gains to the chief priests,—vomiting up, as it were, the bait, but in vain attempting to vomit up the hook with it,—

how was he received? Did he meet with sympathy or pity at their hands? Did they try to comfort him? Did they acknowledge their own equal share of guilt? No. They were more hardened in sin than he: they had no misgivings for themselves, no compassion for him. "What is that to us? see thou to that," is their heartless reply. He has served their purpose, and now they have no more occasion for him, and they care not what becomes of him.

Such is the treatment which men ordinarily meet with, who suffer themselves to be made the tools of others, to minister to their wickedness. And Judas's history ought to serve as a warning to those who are tempted at any time to place themselves in like circumstances,—to do that for others which they know to be wrong; to comply with their wishes, to gratify their desires, in cases in which they cannot do so with a safe conscience. It is not the highest motive; nevertheless, let it have its just weight: believe not the promises of such men, my brethren, and especially reckon not upon their gratitude or consideration for you. As long as you can be of use to them, no doubt they will speak you fair; but when you have served their purposes, expect only to be cast aside. Your repentance or remorse, should either of these spring up within your hearts, will be treated with coldness and contempt:—"What is that to us?" And no wonder: sin is essentially selfish, and the more a man gives himself up to be its slave, the more thoroughly selfish he becomes.

III. But let us pass on to the close of Judas's history, now rapidly approaching. The miserable man, finding that the chief priests would not take back the money, cast it down, in an agony of distress, in the temple, pressing, it would seem from the word used, in the recklessness of his desperation, into the holy place itself, into which it was not lawful for him to enter^b, and departed, and went and hanged himself.

^b See Trench's Synonyms of the New Testament, §. iii.

So doing, he sealed his own condemnation. He delivered himself over with his own hand to the master to whom he had sold himself, to be tormented before his time. O how that master must have exulted when he found how successful his scheme had been! Remorse, and horror, and desperation, had done their work. There was now no longer the possibility of escape. Judas,—the suicide Judas,—was his slave for ever.

IV. Thus we have followed the course of this wretched man's sin to its last dreadful issue in this world. Now let us turn our attention undividedly to the state of mind which contributed so materially to bring about that issue,—his Repentance, as it is called by the Evangelist, though, alas! repentance of a very different kind from that which God will accept and bless.

i. What had this repentance in *common* with true repentance? ii. What did it *lack*, which true repentance has?

i. It had some very remarkable points in common with true repentance, and so far might have been mistaken for it, as a like state of mind, especially if it is not so strongly marked, and does not issue in consequences so visibly and unmistakeably inconsistent with religion, often is.

1. First of all, there was real, unfeigned sorrow, and that most poignant and enduring. "He repented himself," the Evangelist says. He was grieved for what he had done; how sincerely and how bitterly grieved, the dreadful step which he took in consequence shewed. Surely never did true penitent mourn more sincerely, more bitterly.

See then, my brethren, that it is not sorrow alone for evil deeds done, or good deeds left undone, which constitutes genuine repentance. Sooner or later, every ungodly man will have sorrow,—most unfeigned, most bitter sorrow. The consequences of sin are such that men cannot help sorrowing, if not in the prospect of them, at all events in the enduring of them. Hell will know no other sounds than those of sorrow.

Do not let any one conclude, then, that because he is sorry for his evil deeds, therefore he is a true penitent. He may be such; but it is not his sorrow only that makes or proves him such.

2. But I hear some one say, No doubt, it is no sign of repentance when a man's sorrow has respect only to the evil consequences which his sin has brought upon him, or is about to bring upon him: there must be sorrow for the sin itself.

But Judas had this also, to some extent, as the Evangelist's words plainly imply:—"When he saw that Jesus was condemned, he repented himself." His repentance, such as it was, is distinctly connected with his sin, not in its consequences to himself, but in the evil which it had brought upon the innocent and holy Person who was the victim of it. Insensible as he had been before, he was now thoroughly awake to a sense of that evil. Its magnitude, together with the baseness and ingratitude of his own conduct, and possibly, too, the recollection of that touching reproof,—the last words which Jesus had ever addressed to him,—"*Judas, betrayest thou the Son of Man with a kiss?*" were present to his mind with terrible vividness. O, why had he not seen them in the same light before the fatal deed was done?

It was not, then, merely the apprehension of evil consequences to himself that was the cause of Judas's sorrow, though no doubt his thoughts glanced towards these also: there was a distinct reference to his sin, and to the evil which that sin had brought upon Jesus.

And truly a man must be hardened indeed, who has done some grievous wrong to another, bringing upon him great suffering, plunging him into deep distress, and can yet think in his calm moments of what he has done, without keen self-reproach and sadness of spirit; and that apart from the prospect of evil consequences likely to ensue to himself. No

doubt some do arrive at such a state of hardness: the chief priests appear to have done so. But all do not: Judas did not.

Note again then, my brethren, that a man may be sincerely sorry, and his sorrow may have respect, in part, at all events, to the evil which his sin has brought upon the person who has suffered by it, and yet, for all that, there may be no true, genuine repentance.

3. But there is yet another common point at which Judas's repentance, and the repentance of true penitents, seem to touch. Judas confesses his sin; and that not in a general, unthinking way, as people often do, whose very tone and manner shew how little they feel the words which they utter, but particularly, and with most unfeigned seriousness, and without one word of excuse for himself or palliation. "I have sinned, in that I have betrayed the innocent blood." It must have cost him much to make such a confession; and to make it to the persons to whom he did make it. His conscience must have been ill at ease, indeed, before he could bring himself to resort to such a means of lightening it. However, all barriers are burst: he does not wait for a Nathan to charge his sin home upon him, and so to draw forth his acknowledgment; he charges it home upon himself, and forthwith, of his own accord, acknowledges it before others. Wherein (some might think) did David, that eminent example of penitence, go beyond him here?

Even the making confession of our sins, then, most necessary as that is, is not enough to stamp our repentance with the mark of genuineness. Some men confess their sins, or at all events acknowledge themselves in a general way to be sinners, that they may at least have the credit of not being blind to their faults, or of not wishing to play the hypocrite and to blind others. And some men confess their sins, as Judas did, because they are conscience-stricken, and cannot rest till

they have done so. But it is not every sort of confession, as Judas found by sad experience, that brings rest and peace.

4. But we have not yet reached the farthest point to which our comparison extends.

Judas actually strove to undo the evil which he had done, to prevent the fatal consequences of his crime. His Master had, indeed, been condemned by the Jewish council : but sentence was not yet executed. Nay, He was at that moment probably undergoing trial before another tribunal. Pilate had not yet condemned Him. Judas, by bearing witness to His innocency, and by acknowledging his own guilt, did what in him lay to touch the consciences and soften the hearts of those who still had it in their power to save Him. It is true his words were of no avail. The persons to whom they were spoken were not so easily to be turned aside from their purpose. But it was something to have made the effort to turn them aside : not a few would have felt it a relief to their consciences to have made the effort. The history before us, however, shews that a man may go even so far, and yet lack true repentance.

5. One point more :—Judas brought again the money which he had received ; and when the chief priests were unwilling to take it back, he threw it down and left it. Surely this is a sign of true repentance.

No doubt it is *a* sign. And no one can be a true penitent who does not give up his ill-gotten gains, if he have any, and make restitution and satisfaction to the uttermost of his power, for whatsoever wrongs he may have done to others. But it is not a certain sign, as the sad history before us shews.

ii. In all these points, then, which have been mentioned, there was a marvellous resemblance between the repentance of Judas and the repentance of a true penitent. What was lacking in the former, to make it the very same with the latter ?

To sum up all in one word,—*Faith*. It was Faith that was lacking. His sorrow for what he had done, his compunction for the suffering in which he had involved his Master, his confession of his guilt, his restoration of the money, all were unavailing, because they did not spring from Faith.

1. There was no eye to God in them. They might have proceeded equally from an atheist. If there was sorrow, and sorrow for sin, it was not for sin as committed against God,—against a good, and gracious, and holy God. If there was confession of guilt, it was confession to man, not to God. If there was a restoration of the ill-gotten money, it was not from a hearty abhorrence of covetousness, and with an earnest desire after conformity to the image and law of God.

Note how different was David's repentance in these respects. The very first words in which it finds utterance, when Nathan, or rather the Holy Spirit by Nathan, convinces him of his sin, illustrate what I mean:—"I have sinned *against the Lord*." Not one word in what Judas says, of his sin being *against the Lord*.

But, lest I should seem to be laying too much stress upon a single expression, turn to the 51st Psalm, (that lasting record of David's penitence,) and mark how the one unvarying aspect under which he regards his sin, from beginning to end, is as committed against God. His confession throughout is made to God: and the language in which he makes it is, "Against Thee, Thee only, have I sinned, and done this evil in Thy sight." Had he not sinned against man also? Truly he had, and most grievously. And no doubt he saw and felt his guilt in this respect very sensibly. Still it was in its reference to God that its enormity was most apparent. The thought of God swallowed up all other thoughts.

And mark, too, how intensely he longs for deliverance from the dominion of sin. He prays not only for

forgiveness, but for renewal; not only for peace of conscience, but for holiness:—"Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me." What is there in Judas's case that corresponds to this?

2. Another point in which Judas's want of faith manifested itself was, that there was no contrition, no brokenness of spirit, no humiliation, no self-abasement. There was, indeed, sullen gloom, dissatisfaction with himself, remorse, the horrors of an accusing conscience: but these hardened his heart instead of softening it; estranged him from God instead of bringing him to His footstool; sent him forth, like Cain, a wanderer from the presence of the Lord, instead of making him arise and return to Him, like the prodigal to his father.

3. One other great and grievous deficiency there was in Judas's repentance, and this also, like the last-mentioned, growing out of his want of faith. There was no confiding trust in God's mercy. He seemed as it were stunned and paralyzed by the greatness of his crime. He could not raise his eyes, or hands, or heart to heaven. And yet we have no reason to think, dreadful as his crime was, that it was beyond the reach of God's mercy. The Jews who had had a hand in crucifying our Lord had the offer of forgiveness. To Jerusalem, with all its accumulated guilt,—ripe as it was for vengeance,—were the tidings of salvation first preached. The blood which Judas, by his treachery, contributed to shed, cleanseth from all sin,—even, may we doubt it?—from such sin as his. But the thought of forgiveness seems never to have entered his mind. He at once gives himself over as lost; he looks upon his condition as hopeless. When David was in like case,—all the waves and storms of God's righteous indignation rolling over him,—he still kept hold of God's mercy. One moment you see him overwhelmed beneath the surging flood, and are ready to think that he has sunk to rise no more; but the billows sweep on, and the next, you see him still struggling, and gathering

strength while he struggles. Hear his own words: "Innumerable evils have compassed me about: mine iniquities have taken hold upon me, so that I am not able to look up; they are more than the hairs of my head: therefore my heart faileth me^c." What could be more sad, and gloomy, and hopeless, than the state of mind here described? There is not a word which Judas might not have used of his own case. But see how faith stays David up, and keeps him from sinking. Hark! he prays,—(not one word of prayer appears to have fallen from Judas's lips,)—"Be pleased, O Lord, to deliver me: O Lord, make haste to help me. Let them be ashamed and confounded together that seek after my soul to destroy it; let them be driven backward and put to shame that wish me evil. . . . Let all those that seek Thee rejoice and be glad in Thee: let such as love Thy salvation say continually, The Lord be magnified. But I am poor and needy; yet the Lord thinketh upon me. Thou art my help and deliverer; make no tarrying, O my God^d!" O blessed power of faith, that stays itself upon God's mercy, and hopes against hope, discerning still some straggling rays of sunshine in the deepest gloom.

And now does any one ask, Wherein lay the difference between Judas on the one hand, and such true penitents as David or Peter on the other, in that the faith of the one failed, the faith of the others failed not? I cannot undertake to give a full and complete answer: but thus much I may safely say,—that the Holy Spirit had been done despite to, and utterly driven away, in the one case; in the other, though grieved,—deeply grieved,—He still lingered; and His voice was hearkened to before it was too late.

And herein, though men little think of it, lies the great peril of departing from the good ways of God, over and above the actual guilt incurred by so doing. God's Holy Spirit is grieved, His influence over the soul is diminished, and the

^c Ps. xl. 12.

^d Ibid., 13—17. See also Ps. xxxii.

sinner becomes more and more in danger of one or the other of these two ruinous and destructive evils,—either of being delivered over to utter recklessness, or else of sinking, as Judas sank, into hopeless despondency.

O my brethren, take warning,—let us all take warning,—by this sad history which we have been considering.

It may be, we think ourselves beyond the reach of any crime so dreadful as that of which Judas was guilty. Let us not be high-minded, but fear. Who would have thought it possible beforehand, that one chosen by the Saviour Himself to be an apostle, one who had beheld our Lord's miracles, had heard His teaching, had had constantly before his eyes His holy example, should have fallen as Judas fell? It is true, we cannot betray Christ as Judas betrayed Him,—in His person: but we may betray Him in His cause, we may betray Him in His people, we may betray Him in ourselves, by delivering over ourselves, whom He purchased with His blood, to be the bond-slaves of Satan. Let us see, then, that we walk circumspectly. Let us take heed of grieving the Holy Spirit. Let us beware of cherishing evil in our hearts, whether under the form of covetousness, or lust, or pride, or any other form. Let us guard against the beginning of declension. Let us live closely to God in prayer, and watchfulness, and humility, and holy obedience.

But are there any here who have fallen? Whose consciences are even now charging them with grievous declension from the ways of God,—(shall I say?) with some flagrant and shameful sin? My brethren, there are two courses lying before you. They seem to lead in different directions at first, but they meet at last. One is the way of recklessness; the other the way which Judas trod,—the way of despair. Take heed of both. Blessed be God, there is yet a third way, and it is not yet too late for you to enter upon it,—the way of faith, of penitence, of contrition and brokenness of

spirit, of trust, of hope, and eventually of peace and joy, and everlasting blessedness. Enter upon this at once, and without delay. You will find an admirable guide and directory for doing so in the 51st Psalm. Take the words of that Psalm, and make them your own; and cultivate in your heart the spirit which pervades them, day by day. And doubt not but that the experience of that great sinner, and yet eminent saint, by whom they were penned, will be yours also. God, for Christ's sake, will hide His face from your sins and blot out your iniquities. He will create in you a clean heart, and renew a right spirit within you. He will restore unto you the joy of His salvation, and uphold you with His free Spirit. The Lord will open your lips, and your mouth shall shew forth His praise.

SERMON VIII.

THE REPENTANCE OF JUDAS.

BY

EDWARD MEYRICK GOULBURN, D.D.,

**MINISTER OF QUEBEC CHAPEL, CHAPLAIN TO THE LORD BISHOP
OF OXFORD.**

THE REPENTANCE OF JUDAS.

A SERMON,

PREACHED IN

THE CHURCH OF ST. GILES,
OXFORD,

ON WEDNESDAY, FEB. 24, 1858,

BEING THE FESTIVAL OF ST. MATTHIAS.

BY

EDWARD MEYRICK GOULBURN, D.D.,

MINISTER OF QUEBEC CHAPEL, CHAPLAIN TO THE LORD BISHOP
OF OXFORD.

OXFORD,

AND 377, STRAND, LONDON:

JOHN HENRY AND JAMES PARKER.

M DCCC LVIII.



A SERMON,

&c.

MATT. xxvii. 3—5.

“Then Judas, which had betrayed Him, when he saw that He was condemned, repented himself, and brought again the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and elders, saying, I have sinned in that I have betrayed the innocent blood. And they said, What is that to us? see thou to that. And he cast down the pieces of silver in the temple, and departed, and went and hanged himself.”

THE Festival of St. Matthias connects itself immediately with the fall of Judas. We cannot think of the “faithful and true” pastor as on this day set over the Church of God, without reverting to the false Apostle into whose room he was elected. And probably it is the Church’s design that our thoughts should travel in this track. The Calendar brings before us, in a regular cycle, all the great events of the Evangelical Story. Now it is not likely that, in this cycle, such an event as the fall of Judas—an event connected with our Lord’s Death, as the proximate cause of it, and withal so pregnant with instruction for the Church of God—should be left unnoticed. Yet, the reprobate having, of course, no commemoration, it could not otherwise be noticed, than by consecrating a day to the memory of St. Matthias. Matthias seats himself in a Chair already prepared—once occupied, but now vacant. How came it to be vacant? Who was it that once sat there? and why did he vacate it? It is scarcely possible that the mind should not ask these

questions; and if they be asked, this is surely the occasion on which to answer them.

But we have another reason for calling your attention this evening rather to the false than to the true Apostle. The thoughts connected with the fall of Judas are more in keeping with the season of Lent than those connected with the election of Matthias. For the great topic of the season of Lent is Repentance; and Judas is the great instance, planted like a beacon of warning upon the highway of the Evangelical Narrative, of a false repentance.

The fact that there is such a thing as a false repentance is of itself sufficiently startling and alarming, and should set us upon a thorough sifting of our consciences, as to the traits which *our* repentance exhibits. For Repentance is an essential grace; it is one of the conditions on which God holds out to us, through Christ's merits, the hope of pardon and acceptance. If, then, what we fancy to be this grace is simply a delusive appearance, and nothing more than a mimicry of its manner and gestures, we shall be building our hopes upon an insecure foundation, which one day, when perhaps it may be too late to remedy the evil, will prove insufficient to support them.

Judas Iscariot is said in our text to have repented: and, without curiously seeking to detect virtues in a villainous character, (a perverse piece of ingenuity, very commonly practised, indeed, by historians of the day, but very objectionable, as tending to confound the obvious and palpable distinctions between right and wrong,) we may certainly say that the external traits of penitence which Judas exhibited were most hopeful. The inner spirit and operating principles of this grace were of course utterly absent from him, but we apprehend that no genuine repentance could have exhibited more favourable outward phenomena than his.

In bringing forward these phenomena, and shewing from

this sad instance that they may be hollow and unsound,—merest mocking echoes of true penitence in a quarter where it never raised its mingled cry of pain and prayer,—we hope to assist you, and to put you on your guard against deceit, in that sifting of the conscience which is one of the great duties incumbent upon us at this season.—And may God add His blessing to His Word, for Christ's sake.

I. 1. The first good symptom, then, in Judas's repentance was *his restlessness in his sin*. This restlessness has often been the nucleus in the heart, round which *true* repentance has formed. A deep feeling of the dissatisfaction and emptiness of sinful courses, absolutely forbidding acquiescence in them, has lain at the bottom of many a prodigal son's return to his Father. If there was not this in Judas, there was something remarkably like it, to judge from what appears on the face of the narrative. Why could he not carry out his purpose to the end without flinching? The Holy Scripture intimates that he was lost eternally,—that he was “the son of perdition,” that he was “a devil,” that he “went to his own place,” and so forth. This being so, and supposing him to have felt, with more or less of vague apprehension, that it was so,—why did he not, at all events, live as long as he might in the enjoyment of his ill-gotten gains? Why hasten on his eternal doom by his own act? Why throw away the few years of life, and so of *tolerable* existence, which in the order of God's Providence remained to him? Why not go through the tragedy with a resolute will, linger out his span, steel himself against the finger of scorn, count his silver pieces, and hug his money-bag? The answer is, that he was not bad enough or hard enough for this. There was a worm in his conscience which would have made those few years of life unliveable. He could not sit down and take his ease, although there seems to have been no *outward* let or hindrance why he should not have done so. The disciples, from

whom he had seceded, were (as the world accounted them) a contemptible sect in a very contemptible minority. Judas had sided with the authorities of the country, and, though not even those who profit by treachery can ever respect the traitor, those authorities would have been bound to uphold him, and secure him from disturbance. But as it is said, "When God giveth quietness, who then can make trouble?" so, conversely, it might be said with equal truth, "When conscience giveth trouble, who then can make quietness?" Judas was ill at ease in his mind; and, under these circumstances, not all the world could help him to a moment's repose. Yet the repentance proceeding from this disquietude was rotten at the core. The inference is plain, that mere restlessness of conscience under convictions is of itself no certain sign that the spirit of penitence is working in us.

2. The next point is—and it is a very material one—that Judas *makes confession of his sin before men*, even when it must have been evident to him that men would not sympathize with that confession. He returns to the chief priests, says frankly that his conduct had been evil, and implies thereby that the course, which they were pursuing, and in which he had aided and abetted them, was evil also:—"I have sinned, in that I have betrayed the innocent blood." Their rude and ungracious retort (a famous utterance of the worldling's sympathy with conscientious convictions) sufficiently shews that they took the implication in dudgeon:—"What is that to us? see thou to that." It was quite evident, throughout the transaction, that Judas neither cared for them nor feared them; it was patent to him, as to all the world beside, that they were bad men, thirsting for the blood of the Innocent One; and, without a particle of human respect, the traitor allowed this sentiment freely to transpire.

My brethren, it is one of the most favourable symptoms of true repentance, that it throws overboard human respect.

"The fear of man," it is said, "bringeth a snare." Genuine repentance kicks the snare out of the way. Hence the confession of sins before man, the making bare one's own shame, the not quailing before a public exposure, is in some respects the best test of godly sorrow which one can have. For it shews this, at all events,—that the penitent has risen above that regard to human opinion, which holds us all in thrall. In *many* false forms of penitence, sin pains a man simply because he has forfeited human esteem by it. Say that he has been going on for a time with a latent consciousness of acting dishonestly, and fearing to face his accounts, as aware that his expenditure far exceeds his income. At length comes the catastrophe, whether he will or no : his dishonesty is exposed, and his character ruined. The poor soul's refuge under these circumstances is often like that of Judas—suicide. But Judas's motive, it would appear, was higher than his. It is not the consciousness of wrong-doing, but the shrinking from exposure, which in his case urges on the self-murderous act, and adjusts the fatal noose. If creditors could be silenced, and matters hushed up, and character among men preserved, he would live on in ease, and in the hope that his affairs might right themselves. Blasted character, not committed sin, is the evil to which he is sensitive. Judas, on the other hand, proclaims his own shame. Human opinion and human censure seem to have lost their hold upon him. In dying he defies the world, which had hitherto been with him, and makes them veer right round and turn against him. "I have sinned in that I have betrayed the innocent blood. And they said, What is that to us? see thou to that."

Confession of sin before man, then, and the absence from our sorrow of an element of human respect, though most favourable symptoms, as far as they go, do not in themselves go far enough to prove conclusively that our repentance is genuine.

3. The third favourable symptom in the repentance of Judas is that *he made restitution of the bribe which he had received*, and so, as far as that was possible, undid his own action. "He threw down the silver pieces in the temple." He might have enjoyed them; but he could not find it in his heart to do so. They had lost their value to him. This seems indeed to be a very near approach to genuine repentance. For the man's besetting sin was covetousness. Little by little this sin had gained a complete mastery of his moral nature, making its encroachments rapidly, though stealthily, by distinct acts, when from time to time he appropriated to his own use some portion of the money thrown into the common purse of our Lord and His Apostles. "He was a thief," says St. John expressly. But here is the love of money relaxing its hold upon the thief; here (apparently) is the Ethiopian changing his skin, and the leopard his spots. Here is the covetous man making a voluntary surrender of his ill-gotten gains,—just as the Ephesian magicians, the darkness of whose deeds was reprov'd by Christ's Gospel, brought their books of incantations together, and burned them before all men, thereby sacrificing to their new convictions the value of fifty thousand pieces of silver.

My brethren, what shall we say to these things? We are compelled to say that it looks favourably for the traitor. Genuine repentance always involves the undoing of the sin repented of, so far as man can undo the past. If property has been stolen, it must be restored. If character has been injured by us, we must retract the slander as publicly as it was divulged. If we have influenced others for evil, we must seek to neutralise and cancel that influence. If we have withheld from the poor their due, or from the cause of Religion the maintenance which it requires at our hands, we must now make it good. Yet it appears from this example, that although all genuine repentance must have this feature,

yet not every repentance which has this feature is genuine. We must look to it that this trait attaches itself to our repentance; yet must we not rest satisfied with the fact that it does so attach, but probe our hearts more deeply still.

4. The climax of all these favourable symptoms attaching to the repentance of Judas, is that this unhappy soul *confessed Christ before men*.

It is very observable that another thief came subsequently in contact with Our Blessed Lord, whose repentance was by Him graciously accepted and highly honoured; and that this thief also evinced his penitence by confessing CHRIST before men, when the princes of this world sat and spake against Him. In some respects these two thieves are remarkably contrasted. The first of them, though long associated with Our Blessed Lord, closed his career with a burst of worldly sorrow, which wrought despair and death. The second, who was never thrown across our LORD's path, till a few hours before his end, and whose previous course had been in every respect alienated from Christ, exhibited in his last moments that godly sorrow, which works "repentance unto salvation not to be repented of." But, notwithstanding these points of strong contrast, there is something very similar in the confessions of the two thieves. Listen to them. The one says, "I have sinned in that I have betrayed the innocent blood." He asserts the innocence of Jesus; and if His innocence, then also His Messiahship and Divine Sonship: for Jesus claimed these dignities; and to claim them without being entitled to them, would be, not innocence, but blasphemy. The second thief's confession is a close parallel: he first of all condemns himself, and then vindicates the innocence of Jesus. "Dost not thou fear God, seeing thou art in the same condemnation? And we indeed justly; for we receive the due reward of our deeds; but this Man hath done nothing amiss." Ah! my brethren, sup-

posing only the utterances of these two thieves left on record, without any further notice of their characters, who could have augured thence the difference of their lot, and the tremendous gulf which parts them now, and will part them through Eternity? What an overwhelming proof have we here, that in estimating repentance and faith, God regards, and therefore we too must regard, the heart, and not the utterance of the lips; that He looks to the inner spirit only, and is not mystified or deluded by the bursts of anguish to which the mouth gives vent! What an incontrovertible evidence that two men may pursue the same career outwardly, do the same actions, say the same words, behave in the same way, and yet be under the empire of totally opposite principles! And what an evidence, moreover, that the faith which merely stands in the avowal of Jesus, without involving trust in Him, or love of Him,—the faith which distinguishes the professing Christian from the sceptic or the Unitarian,—is by itself utterly insufficient to secure the soul's salvation. Judas had *this* faith. Nay, the very devils, though they neither love Him nor trust in Him, are far too enlightened to refuse acknowledgment to Jesus as the Son of God: they also "believe and tremble."

II. We have thus exhibited the favourable outward symptoms in the repentance of Judas. And the question which naturally arises is, Where then did this repentance fall short? what were the flaws of it? This question we shall attempt to answer, with the same design as before—that of furnishing you with criteria for a close and sifting examination of conscience.

There was one radical flaw, then, in this repentance of Judas, which pervaded the whole of it, as a crack runs from the brim to the pedestal of some precious ornamental vase, and into which all the weak points of it are ultimately resolvable. There appears to have been in his state of mind

no regard to Almighty God, whether of fear, love, or trust. His sorrow, though most agonizing, was not the godly sorrow whose blessed effects St. Paul describes in the Second Epistle to the Corinthians; and on the suicide's grave might be inscribed for an epitaph that pregnant sentence of Inspiration, in which the Apostle delineates with one graphic, masterly stroke the frightful issue of a career such as his; "THE SORROW OF THE WORLD WORKETH DEATH."

1. The first weak point in the repentance of Judas was, that it had no grasp of another world. A man who commits suicide (supposing him to be not subject to derangement of mind while resolving on and perpetrating the deed) can have no such grasp. To Judas, the eternal world, of which His Master spoke so often, was all shadowy as the baseless fabric of a dream, though it might be a beautiful dream. It was to him impalpable; and he had not the faith which alone could make it a reality. But there was a world all around him, in the centre of which he was placed, very real and very palpable, obtruding its reality upon him through his senses. Probably he had followed Our Lord all along in the expectation that He would set up an earthly kingdom; and as it dawned upon him, by Christ's predictions of His Death, and by the evident drifting of events in that direction, that this expectation was to be frustrated, his allegiance to Jesus, which had not been cemented (as was the case with the other Apostles) by any spiritual bond, grew more and more unsteady. He followed the Saviour with this world in his eye, and when he became convinced that no earthly honours or emoluments would requite his services, he began to draw off from Him. Now the tangible advantages of the world all take shape in, and are summarily represented by, money. Do but get money, and you shall command anything you wish in this world—friends, position, power, nay, even rank. Accordingly, Judas the worldling, with a very faint and shadowy conception of the world,

come, united a very lively appreciation of the hard, solid, tangible benefits which were at the command of money. Well would it have been for him, could he have looked with definite aim into the great eternal future, which is all-absorbing to a spiritual mind, and have said with his brother-thief, as Jesus was approaching the barriers of another world, "Lord, remember me when Thou comest into Thy kingdom." But the kingdom, according to Judas's idea of it, was to be the kingdom of this present world. Such a kingdom Jesus uniformly disclaimed: implicitly, when He retired from the multitude who sought to make Him a king; explicitly, when He stood before Pilate.

My dear hearers, is Judas so uncommon a character among ourselves, that his example yields no warning? Though our conceptions of him—conceptions which we have nourished from our childhood upwards—are those of a monster of iniquity, does he not turn out, upon a closer examination, to be a man of flesh and blood like ourselves? Are there not those among us, whose views of another world are so hazy and unsubstantial, that they cannot be said to take hold of the mind at all, or exert the smallest real influence upon it? Men whose strong and keen sympathies with the world-system, in the heart of which they live, exclude altogether apprehensions, hopes, and fears in connection with another system, which cannot be reached either by sense or by experience? Men in whose mind secularities,—I do not say blameworthy secularities, but merely secularities, whether of the counter, or of the desk, or of the political coterie, or of the fashionable circle—fill up the whole field of vision? These persons may not be at all wanting in respectability, and a decorous exterior: far from it. They may not be unfamiliar with holy things. Judas was not unfamiliar with them. He walked side by side with Our Lord, listened to His teaching, witnessed His miracles, partook of and administered His ordinances. And these men are not

lacking in similar traits of character. Their punctual performance of certain religious duties enters as an item on their side into the account drawn up by their self-esteem. They come to Church, and the words of truth fall on their outward ears. Perhaps at stated intervals they communicate, and with a feeling that Communion is proper, becoming, suitable to their position. Perhaps this familiarity with things sacred tends, as was no doubt the case with Judas, to deaden their religious sensibilities. But be it how it may, those sensibilities are not alive. This world is intensely real, the next intensely unreal, to them. No emotion is stirred within them by the things which are not seen. Though they live in the midst of religious Ordinances, spiritual influence, or what the Apostle calls "the power of the world to come," has never yet drawn them within its charmed circle. Now any vexation for past misdeeds, however wild and frantic, which does not keep its eye fixed upon eternity, or pursue sin into the unseen world, must necessarily be hollow and unsound, however favourable the other traits which it wears. The fundamental element of all religion is the realization of the unseen. Where a man does not realize it—where eternal things are to the mind a mere phantasmagoria of quaint and incongruous images, and not a real, living power exerting a pressure on the spirit,—he may fret his heart into tatters with sorrow for sin, but he shall be not one whit nearer to holiness or glory. Without faith in the invisible world, repentance lacks altogether a spiritual element. It is of the earth, earthy, and drives the man away from, instead of towards, the Bosom of God. It is simply a fruit of nature, not of grace.

2. The next weak point in the repentance of Judas was, that it turned on the pivot of self. Where self is everything with a man, and God is banished from the field of view, it must follow, as a necessary consequence, that if self is destroyed in its own esteem, the man has nothing to fall back upon.

This seems to have been the case with Judas; and this hypothesis furnishes the true solution of the difficulty, which some have found in the first verse of our text. "Then Judas which betrayed Him, *when he saw that He was condemned*, repented himself." How then? it has been asked, was Judas not prepared for the result, to which his act of treachery obviously led? Knowing the malignity of the enemies of Jesus, he must of course have calculated upon the probability, or rather the almost certainty, of such a result: but the Evangelist's meaning plainly is, that such a result, when at last it did come, opened his eyes all of a sudden to his own meanness. It dashed to pieces, with one deadly blow, the man's self-respect. So long as he had the prop of self-esteem, there was something to support him, and to make life tolerable; but this prop demolished, no more hope remained to one who, like Judas, had never learned to lean upon God.

My brethren, there is a sorrow for sin, the account of which is simply this,—Pride broken in its own conceit, and put thoroughly out of humour with itself. This sorrow apes very exactly the garb and language of true repentance, because in true repentance one main element is profound distrust of self; and this sorrow is a sincere vexation with self: not, however, so much a distrust of self, as (what is very different) a disgust with self. Ah! Judas's suicide has been the true type, in this respect, of many a suicide since his day. The intemperate man, who may have (despite his intemperance) some fine features of character attaching to him, is warned again and again of the wreck which the indulgence of such a sin will make, not only of his higher nature, but of his health, and perhaps also of his prospects in this world. He struggles fitfully with his ruling passion, and even holds out and makes head against it for some considerable period; but at last—once and again, and again, and yet again—the horrible craving for drink asserts its mastery over him. After

some very flagrant fall, his eyes seem to be opened, on his return to consciousness, to the depth of his own degradation. He has reduced himself to the level, or rather lower than the level, of the beasts that perish. He once flattered himself that he had a generous spirit, fine sympathies, a sense of honour; but all that proud consciousness is now gone: he has been wallowing like a sow in the mire of sensuality. He too, like Judas, has no grasp of another world,—the revelation of things unseen and eternal has never come home to him with power; and when he thinks of the state after death, he mutters to himself some such heathenish foolery as eternal sleep, rest from the storms of life for all and every one, and so forth. He too, like Judas, has never had any realizing apprehension of God, or of sin in reference to God,—and to have no such realizing apprehension, is just to have no staff to lean upon, when the world draws away from us, as the sparkling tide recedes from stranded seaweed, and when the heart is fairly beaten out of conceit with itself. In such a state of mind, the man naturally becomes frantic with himself. And who shall wonder if, in more ardent and impulsive temperaments, the strong passion prevails even over the love of life? Who shall wonder if he lays violent hands upon that self of which he now despairs?

My brethren, suicide is a rare case, Almighty God having placed in our nature certain securities which make it rare; but his must be indeed a shallow mind who cannot see in extreme cases like these, the operation of principles, which pervade and invalidate the repentance of large numbers of men, and so cannot draw a lesson from the doom of Judas.

A true penitent, my brethren, when revelations are made to him of the utter vileness, meanness, baseness of self, can bear them quietly, and meekly, and without falling into despondency;—why? Because he has the eye of his heart still fixed upon God. God may be displeased with him for the present, and may be even now making him painfully con-

scious of that displeasure; and thus one might imagine at first sight that even *this* prospect was dark. But there always is, and I believe there is always felt by the heart to be (even in its darkest hours), a background of infinite love in the Divine Nature, which will one day surely reveal itself to the waiting, praying penitent. He who knows that God sent His Son to die for lost mankind, when they were in the arms of rebellion against Him, cannot really believe, to however many discomforts his soul may be at present subject, that such a God will wear always an aspect of sternness towards a sorrow which has really a reference to Himself,—to His Will, and Word, and requirements. “*Now* men see not the bright light which is in the clouds,” says Solomon; “but the wind passeth, and cleanseth them.” The firmament of the soul may be for awhile obscured with clouds; so that when the heart looks even to Godward, it shall see no light at present; but by-and-bye shall pass the cleansing wind, which clears the soul’s atmosphere, and then shall appear the once shrouded light, full of hope, and joy, and augury. David understood this well, when he sang to his harp that strain so plaintive and yet so hopeful,—“Why art thou cast down, O my soul? and why art thou disquieted within me? Hope in God; for I shall yet praise Him, who is the health of my countenance and my God.” Observe,—“I shall yet praise Him;” the soul is conscious that God’s present displeasure is something like the disguise which Joseph wore to his brethren, (when he made himself strange to them, and spake roughly to them,) and that there lurks a heart of love behind it, which will ere long break through the disguise.

But, apart from the regard to God which the true penitent has, and the false penitent has not,—a regard which is the source of hope to the one, and the lack of which is the source of despair to the other,—it should be remarked also, that, as we have already implied, the false penitent’s disposition towards *himself* is not of the right description. Hot vexation

with self, my brethren, is not only of no avail, but is absolutely an undesirable feeling, to be checked and repressed, not fostered. Meekness and gentleness are required from us by the law of Christ in our dealings with our neighbours; and the same law, rightly understood, requires the same dispositions in dealing with ourselves. For if we are to love our neighbours as ourselves, conversely also we are to love ourselves as our neighbours. Our souls were created by God for no lower an end than the enjoyment of Communion with Himself; they have been redeemed at no lower a price than that of the precious Blood of Christ;—we may not treat them, however low they may fall, with loathing and disgust, or handle them with irritability and harshness. An expostulation with the heart, firm but gentle, in which the sharp wine of censure shall be tempered with the oil of consolation, so as not to aggravate the smart which we design to heal,—an expostulation such as that which a tender father uses to an erring child,—this is the duty which a man owes to himself, when he has fallen low and is humbled in his own conceit, together with a wistful, hopeful, longing, praying glance to the Heavenly Father whom he has offended, under the assurance that even dogs have crumbs dropt to them from the great table of His mercy—that, in His boundless love and Almighty grace, there is yet lifting up, even for the most degraded and abject of His creatures.

Sorrow of this sort restores the soul, whereas a frantic vexation does but mar and, as it were, tear it into shreds. The last is impetuous, but transitory; the first is quiet, but abidingly influential upon the character. The one is like the mountain-torrent, which dashes down, swollen with winter-rains, and spreads devastation far and wide over the country; but if you seek for it in summer, you shall not find, in the parched gully which formed its bed, so much as a drop of water to cool your tongue;—the other is like the quiet, full-fed stream, which without noise or perturba-

tion glides along its natural channel, to which men and cattle come to slake their thirst, and along whose fertile banks the valleys stand so thick with corn that they laugh and sing.

In conclusion, my brethren, let me exhort you to take the signs of true repentance which have been exhibited to you in this sermon, and apply them to your own consciences on your knees before God, in the privacy of your chamber. Is your repentance the fruit of a godly sorrow,—a sorrow having reference to God,—and accordingly, is it lighted up, as all such sorrow assuredly will be, by an element of hope and energy for the future? Or does it revolve upon altogether another centre,—the centre of the world, or the centre of self? Does it reduce itself, when probed, into sorrow for loss of character, or sorrow for loss of self-esteem; or, in other words, into sorrow—not for sin, but for the suffering which sin entails? If so, the tendency of that sorrow, according to the law of its being, is towards *despair*. Despair is the great back Maelstrom, in the direction of which it is silently drifting.

Perhaps this sorrow is even now setting within you,—passing out of the state of flux and crystallizing into despair,—yet not into despair in the shape in which Judas exhibited it, but into the commoner form, the more insidious form, yet not the less dangerous form, of a dead and motionless acquiescence in spiritual stagnation. You have made a desperate struggle or two, it may be, against the evil tendencies of your nature; you have made honest and earnest efforts to be religious,—rather, however, seeking yourself in all this than God; rather with reference to your own comfort and well-being, than to His gracious Word and Will. And you have failed, or seem to have failed; time after time your efforts have been beaten back. And at length you are beginning to think that the holiness to which you are called, is an attainment beyond your strength,—a hill too steep for such as you to climb. Accordingly, you are just about to

resign yourself to the current of your nature, and to collapse into a dead, prayerless, effortless state of mind,—retaining, however, all the signs and symptoms of Christian profession, and so keeping up appearances in your own eyes, and in those of the world. My brethren, this is the subtlest form which despair takes,—the form, not of frantic outrage towards oneself, but of smooth-faced, complacent, respectable indolence, in which spiritual numbness creeps over the faculties, and the man becomes, by his own assent and consent, an utter stranger to the power of godliness. It shall not be so with thee, my brother, if any soul hears me to-day, upon whom, by reason of repulsed and disappointed efforts, this deadly numbness is beginning to creep. In thyself indeed thou *art* lost,—“wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked.” “O Israel,” cries the Lord to thee, “thou hast destroyed thyself; but in Me is thy help.” Aye, “in Me is thy help.” Lift up thine eyes in *that* quarter, despairing penitent. There is light for thee there, methinks, struggling through the prison-bars of thy spiritual captivity. God’s love for thee is such, that He precipitated Himself from heaven by the Incarnation to pick up, and make whole, the fragments of thy poor, stumbling, bleeding, broken spirit. His grace, too, is omnipotent,—omnipotent in the realm of mind no less than in that of matter. Beware that thou limit not, in thy conceptions, either His love or His power. He stretches forth His hand to you while you are sinking, as of old to Peter upon the wave. Take heart, man, and grasp it. Fasten the mind’s eye steadily, not on the boisterous billows, but on Him. The repentance which fastens its eye upon Christ cannot be cast out. If the repentance of the thief Judas turned to despair, because there was no element of spiritual feeling in it, that of the penitent thief, which referred itself to the Lord, and cast itself into His arms, was instantly met with a welcome of overflowing mercy. A single glance of the heart towards His compassion and power, and

towards "the world to come," over which that power is specially exercised, unlocked all the treasure-house of Our Lord's compassion, and fetched down blessings beyond the power of the tongue to express:—"Verily, I say unto thee, to-day shalt thou be with Me in Paradise." Judas, like a falling star, dropped from the heaven of Christ's companionship into the bottomless pit of perdition. *He* had been with Christ in this world, but his awful lot in the future state was to be eternally severed from the light and joy of that society. The penitent robber, on the other hand, is lifted up, by the strong hand of Love, into that light and joy:—"To-day shalt thou be with Me in Paradise." And the same shall be the case with every penitent who, looking beyond the barriers of time with a realizing faith, and seeing Jesus mighty to save, commits his soul to that boundless love, with a prayer even for the lowest place in His favour: "Lord, remember me when Thou comest into Thy kingdom."

Wherefore lift up the hands which hang down, and the feeble knees. Thine is the Blood of the Atonement, a running stream to discharge all thy guilt. Thine is the Spirit of Grace, to heal, to restore, to sanctify thee. Under such auspices, what may not be hoped for? With such powers enlisted on thy side, what may not be achieved? Holiness may seem at present an impossible attainment to one who has fallen so low, an inaccessible pinnacle towering above thy head, and defying all thine efforts to scale it. But to God all things are possible. And to him, too, are all things possible who believeth—believeth in the power and willingness of Christ to draw him out of the abyss of sin, and giving his hand to that Everlasting Father, follows whithersoever He leads,—though there be a Red Sea of difficulty and discouragement before him, still in the might of his God "going forward."

SERMON IX.

THE REPENTANCE OF AHAB.

BY

JAMES RUSSELL WOODFORD,

VICAR OF KEMPSPORD, GLOUCESTERSHIRE.

THE REPENTANCE OF AHAB.

A SERMON,

PREACHED IN

THE CHURCH OF ST. MARY-THE-VIRGIN,

OXFORD,

ON FRIDAY, FEB. 26, 1858.

BY

JAMES RUSSELL WOODFORD,

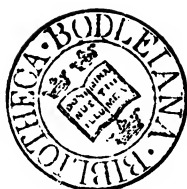
VICAR OF KEMPSFORD, GLOUCESTERSHIRE.

OXFORD,

AND 377, STRAND, LONDON:

JOHN HENRY AND JAMES PARKER.

M DCCCLVIII.



A SERMON,

&c.

1 KINGS xxi. 25.

“There was none like unto Ahab, which did sell himself to work wickedness in the sight of the Lord.”

THE Bible is essentially a religious history : we do not mean so much that it records common events in a religious tone, as that it is the history of the progress of religion amongst mankind. The whole volume is the development of the brief words of promise uttered to Adam in Paradise, leading us onward from the first Divine mention of the seed of the woman ; so short, so mystical, as perhaps barely to be grasped by the ripest saints of the elder dispensations—even to the full and final result, as it shall be seen hereafter in the personal Apocalypse of God, to which the whole career of humanity seems working up, as its crown and consummation. Until we distinctly recognise this peculiar character of the Bible, we shall be very apt to err in assigning the proper weight to its various statements. In every history, the value of the record upon a given point increases in proportion to the nearness of that point to the main subject. On matters subsidiary, or altogether independent, its testimony is much less important. What the writer means specifically to treat of is that upon which his words are to be construed in the utmost rigour. Now the Bible being, as we have said, the history of religion, is in this respect the reverse of all other histories. They, purporting to relate the advance of civilization, the progress of a kingdom as a kingdom of this world, take in religion only so far as it has conduced to the development of the national character. Contrariwise, the Bible, whose object is to trace through the tangled web of terrestrial affairs the

one slender thread of God's revelation, deals with earthly matters, physical and political events, arts and sciences, only as they touch upon that mystery of godliness which it is its grand object to unfold. This will at once explain the slight notice which contemporaneous occurrences of great moment, so far as this world is concerned, obtain in the Bible narrative. It may also go far to account for what has been so much pressed—the scientific incorrectness of the Biblical description of sundry circumstances. If the Bible is to be taken as the chronicle of religion, then in all that concerns what is essentially a part of religion, we may expect fulness, completeness, accuracy, whilst we shall scarcely be justified in looking for so much in reference to what is subsidiary.

Now the history of Ahab, to which our attention is to be directed to-night, suggests thoughts such as these. The reign of Ahab occupies a considerable portion of the Book of Kings, but the bulk of the narrative is made up of his conduct in matters of religion. The gathering of Baal's prophets and their discomfiture upon Mount Carmel; the murder of Naboth, and the appropriation of his vineyard; the vision of Micaiah, with the doomed monarch's rejection of his warning,—these are the events which naturally rise up before us as we think of Ahab. Nay, it is the dark memorial of the text which thrills every mind as it recalls the image of the apostate king: "There was none like unto Ahab, which did sell himself to work wickedness in the sight of the Lord." It is a vision of unparalleled sin, of a man bartering his soul for unrighteous gains, of a man exceeding all other men in guilt,—the chiefest of ancient transgressors, whom, in the terrible language of old prophecy, hell from beneath seems moved to meet at his coming,—which the name of *Ahab* evokes. It is a name like that of "Judas," which chills us with fear, as we appear to identify an individual soul lost for ever.

And yet is there another side of the picture.—And, if the reign of Ahab had been written in any book save the Bible, far less heavy would be the thunder-clouds which gather round his name. Even the Bible gives a hint of better things:—"Now the rest of the acts of Ahab, and all that he did, and the ivory house which he made, and all the cities that he built, are

they not written in the book of the chronicles of the kings of Israel?" It is very striking, this glimpse of sunshine flashing through the lurid atmosphere of that rebellious life. We appear for a moment, as we read, to catch the world's view of Ahab; a vigorous, energetic monarch, promoting the prosperity of his people, improving their habitations, fortifying them in their possession of the soil, gathering up scattered lawless hordes into civilized citizenship; finding time to foster art, and astonishing his age by the magnificence and costliness of his architecture. Even the last expedition, in which he fell, was such as would read well in a common history. For Ramoth-Gilead was a town which the Assyrians, when vanquished by Israel, had stipulated to surrender, and had afterwards failed to fulfil their compact. Yet of all these brighter features of Ahab's reign we hear little. The Bible, as though to make the lesson more emphatic, just alludes to them, but does not permit our minds to be detained thereby. It is the history of religion in Ahab and under Ahab which the Bible would teach us; and so the fairer side, which is this world's side, only shews itself to render more oppressive the moral midnight which settles upon his name as one who sold himself, more than any other, to work evil in the sight of the Lord. It is the *personal* character of Ahab which we have to investigate to-night. To elucidate this, we have two means: 1. His general conduct;

2. His temporary repentance.

I. Ahab's general conduct, as revealing the essential character of his mind.

Now what we would bring before you is the living man who in his life satisfied the terrible record of the text. It is with great sinners as with great saints; we learn to think of their guilt or their piety in the abstract, rather than to realize them as breathing men. The shadow of Ahab looms in the far distance as that of a sinner of almost unequalled magnitude. With Judas and Pilate, he stands so pre-eminent in iniquity, that it is hard to represent him to ourselves as an ordinary man, actuated by the same motives which influence us, having, like us, his better moments and nobler hopes. Ahab was not always the Ahab of historic infamy; and what

we would endeavour to do is to delineate him as he was, while yet upon the earth, before his day went down in utter darkness. We shall find, we think, that with all its eternity of shame, it is a character which is reproduced again and again.

The clue to the career of Ahab is to be discovered, we believe, in the counter-influences of Jezebel and Elijah.

You will find two distinct stages in the fall of Israel from the worship of the true God. The first is that called the sin of Jeroboam, the son of Nebat. This was to worship the true God under an image. He set up calves, (perhaps choosing that shape in recollection of Aaron's golden calf,) and said, "These, oh Israel, are the gods which brought thee out of the land of Egypt." The second stage of apostasy is called the way of Ahab^a. This was not only to worship the true God idolatrously, but to worship other gods,—to worship Baalim. This worship of Baalim has been identified with the worship of departed heroes; and it has been thought that so much is denoted in the verse, "They joined themselves unto Baal-peor, and ate the *offerings of the dead*." The Baalim, whose worship Ahab introduced, we may, perhaps, most correctly understand to have been deified heroes, who presided over the powers of nature. Thus it is the threat of Jeremiah, that the bones of the princes of Israel shall be spread before the *sun*, and the *moon*, and all the *host* of heaven; whom they have loved, and whom they have served, and whom they have worshipped^b. Now this worship of Baal, or Baalim, is traced originally to Phœnicia, the country of Jezebel, and thus we gather that it was under the influence of Jezebel that Ahab lost all remembrance of the one true God. Jeroboam had paved the way for this complete apostasy. By an unworthy image of the God of Abraham, he had shaken the faith of his people; Ahab, at his wife's prompting, brought in an entirely novel system of religion, such as had prevailed in her native land. The result of this rapid succession of religious creeds was, naturally, the loosening of the hold of all religion upon the minds of king and subject. The times were out of joint. The connection with the temple at Jerusalem had been superseded by a connec-

^a 2 Chron. xxii. 3.

^b Jer. xxiii. 13.

tion with the idols of Tyre. And this power of Jezebel over Ahab, which is manifested in his adoption of her religious creed, is further remarkably evinced in the story of the murder of Naboth. "I," cried Jezebel, "will give thee the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite." Throughout that gross prostitution of royal authority, Jezebel's is the strong will overruling all objections, making light of all difficulties. Ahab yearns for the reward of crime, but has little appetite for the crime itself. He permits wickedness to be done in his name, but, a coward in his sin, shrinks from soiling his own hand.

Jezebel's was not, however, the only power abroad in that evil time. Whilst the king and his followers had abandoned the last pretence of worshipping the true God, and the ivory house of his magnificence was filled only with the Baalim of his wife's idolatry; in the high places of his kingdom, Elijah was reasserting and vindicating the existence and presence of the Almighty. We can well imagine the reports which would reach Ahab's ears of the growing authority of the mysterious man whose word had shut up heaven, and restored life to the dead; for whose spiritual training the wilderness had gleamed with unearthly fire, and the old rocks of Horeb heaved again with the felt presence of the Creator. Somewhat, it may be, of the same awe with which Herod had been impressed by John the Baptist, had Ahab conceived of the first Elias. So much we should gather from his sufferance of all Elijah's proceedings upon Mount Carmel. Elijah did but speak, and Ahab forthwith, we read, sent and gathered all the prophets of Baal together. From the very shade of Jezebel's roof they were summoned; and through the whole of that stupendous scene in which the fire from heaven wrung forth the cry, "The Lord, He is the God," and throughout the after-slaughter of the false prophets, at Elijah's command, when not one was allowed to escape alive; Ahab himself, the founder of Baal-worship, stood by, sanctioning the work of Elijah, as at other times the impurities of Jezebel.

And it is in this counter-power of Elijah and Jezebel that we find the key to unlocking the character of the man whom

they alternately swayed. Ahab was no resolute criminal, who boldly calculated what amount of crime was necessary for his ends, and perpetrated it without remorse. Ahab was not a man never visited by compunctions of conscience, a stranger to all fear and regret. His was no strong heart, which deliberately set itself to fight against its own convictions; over which holy words could have no power, and the presence of righteousness no control. Far otherwise. Ahab was a man weakly wicked. Alike to evil and to good, he was led on by stronger wills than his own. In his ivory palace, Jezebel bowed him to her false worship, and to a participation in her enormous crimes; but no sooner did he meet Elijah, than the great prophet asserted over the unstable king all the majestic might of holiness. The words of reproach, "Art thou he that troubleth Israel?" died away upon the lips of the conscience-stricken ruler, and he who came to revile, followed, a moral captive, the bidding of the messenger of heaven. And in Ahab, thus represented, we have a far more touching lesson than that which would be furnished by supposing him to be a resolved and desperate criminal. It is the pitiable spectacle of a weak man letting others plunge him into everlasting destruction. Ah, sirs! Is not this exactly the story of many a man's ruin amongst ourselves? They are comparatively few who start in life with a fixed purpose to be wicked, to live uncontrolled by God's laws. That which slays souls now-a-days, as in the case of Ahab, is the want of deep religious conviction, of a firm purpose to resist evil, of strength of character to persevere in what we know to be right. What shall we say of him who lets his standard of morality, his worship of God, his prayers, his Communion, to be dictated by the custom of his contemporaries, not by his own persuasions of what ought to be? what of the man who permits dissolute companions to draw him from his own steadfastness into their riot, because he has not the moral courage to stand firmly upon his conscience? Is it not *Ahab*, led away by the stronger mind of Jezebel? And what we would urge is the great truth, which Ahab's history demonstrates, that there may be *intense* sinfulness before God, without any deliberate design. He who

sold himself to work wickedness, so that there was none like him, only consented to be led by others; he was not himself the initiator of the great sins which have procured him a pre-eminence of shame. There were times, moreover, as we have seen, when Ahab was susceptible of holier emotions,—times when he could feel the reality of Elijah's mission, and join in the rooting out the evil his own hands had wrought.—Shall we sketch you an *Ahab* of the present day? Fashions change, shapes of temptation vary, but human nature in its essence, and temptation in its essence, alter not. Have you never come in contact with those who, being without any high Christian principles, are led on, not so much by viciousness of heart as from mere feebleness of purpose and gaiety of spirit, into acts of license and godlessness; and who, nevertheless, when removed out of the sphere of corrupt influences, can feel the beauty of faith, truth, and purity; who, whilst in companionship with men of exalted character and religious faith, gather somewhat of their tone, so that a momentary fire is kindled within, and their own prayers insensibly become more life-like, and their words more guarded, and their thoughts more elevated? It is the power of Elijah upon Ahab; the gentle force of holiness upon unholiness. And then, again, they have to go forth from the little sanctuary in which, for a short space, they have tasted the powers of the world to come; and the tide of this world's strifes and rivalries, and dissipations, surges around them; and, alas! their prayers insensibly grow shorter and more hurried, and their solemn impressions wax fainter; the eternal world, with its awful verities, which for a moment had come strangely forward, withdraws into the dim distance, and they are once more heartless, prayerless, godless. Old temptations recur, old corrupt habits reassume their ascendancy; Elijah's hour is gone,—it is Jezebel again. Are there any in this congregation thus wavering between two opinions, whose conduct and feelings vary according as they are at home, or in this University, in the country, or the city, with thinking men or reckless associates? If so, it is for them that Ahab speaks with a voice of fear. We would take them back, those men irresolute alike in good and ill, to the old king of

Israel, and bid them mark how a life may be thus dribbled away without earthly honour or heavenly hope; how a man may let others lose his soul for him; how the highest point of iniquity may be reached, not by a bold step and a stern heart, but by infirmity of purpose, and weakness of will; how a person may never consciously resign his intention of serving God, or abandon his hope of heaven, and yet equal far more daring offenders in moral worthlessness, whilst alternating between religion and irreligion, faith and unbelief—between Elijah and Jezebel. Such an one was Ahab, grand not even in his crimes, a palterer with his conscience, from very weakness of character selling his soul.

II. But we pass from Ahab's career in general to the particular scene of his repentance.

It is probably true of every great sinner, that there has been some crisis in his life upon which his after-destiny has seemed to hang; some moment when there was a more than common struggle in his heart, whether to go on in iniquity, or to draw back; as though good and evil angels were perceptibly contending for his soul, or as if the Spirit of God within him were making one last effort to reclaim him, before abandoning for ever its polluted temple. Such a moment, probably, was that when Felix listened to the reasoning of St. Paul, and trembled on his judgment-seat, at his prisoner's solemn words. Such, again, may have been that moment to Simon Magus when he quailed at the stern denunciation of St. Peter, and cried, "Pray ye that none of these things of which ye have spoken may come upon me." Such a gracious season also may there have been in the history of the most tremendous guilt the world ever knew; when it is recorded that Judas Iscariot, seeing what was done, repented himself, and brought again the thirty pieces of silver. Even to that lost soul was vouchsafed, we may glean, a brief interval, when the beginnings of true repentance stirred within, when even he took the first step towards amendment in the restitution of the price of his iniquity, but had no strength to perfect penitence,—a moment when even his eternity trembled in the balance. And of this critical character appears to have been to Ahab the hour when Elijah

met him in the vineyard of Naboth. The prophet, by a divine instruction, encountered him at the instant when, having killed, he was taking possession of the land of his victim; and poured forth the prediction of the annihilation of himself and all his house, for the provocation wherewith he had provoked God. At those words of righteous wrath the king's heart was for awhile broken; for a moment he seems to have caught a glimpse of the greatness of his sin. Perhaps the very atrocity of his last act, the murder of Naboth, startled him, as the mind of many a man long used to a certain degree of crime recoils when he first finds himself plunged into still deeper waters. "It came to pass," we read, "when Ahab heard those words, that he rent his clothes, and put sackcloth on his flesh, and fasted, and lay in sackcloth, and went softly."

Now it is doubtless the commencement of penitence which is here described,—dismay, confession of guilt, humiliation of heart; yet that Ahab's repentance was incomplete has never been questioned. In the very last scene of his life, between two and three years after this event, we find him surrounded by false prophets, and with difficulty, at Jehoshaphat's repeated request, suffering Micaiah, a prophet of the Lord, to prophesy before him. It is remarkable that he is said on that occasion to have collected "about four hundred" false prophets; the same number which are recorded to have fed at Jezebel's table, and whom he had permitted Elijah to destroy upon Mount Carmel;—as though he had again allowed an establishment of Baal's prophets to be set up under his own roof. And thus we are able to answer the question, wherein consisted the incompleteness of Ahab's repentance? That repentance comprehended, we have seen, many of the primary steps. There was conviction of guilt, acknowledgment, and sorrow; wherein, therefore, was it defective? It is here that the lesson of Ahab deepens in its solemnity, for it suggests the two main causes of the frequent incompleteness of repentance among ourselves. First and foremost stands that infirmity of will which so often leaves a man at the mercy of whoever will take the trouble to lead him; by which his resolutions of amendment, like footprints on the sand, are

washed out by the first return of the tide of worldly associations. It was thus with Ahab; the same infirmity of purpose, the same yielding to the influence of Elijah or Jezebel, according as he was with the one in his ivory house, or with the other by the repaired altar of the Lord, which rendered his whole career so "halting," clung to him even at the moment of special grace. When God spake audibly to his soul, he could hear, but not retain, the Divine utterances. The good seed fell upon the soil; it was neither scattered by the winds nor rejected by the rock; but there was not much earth, and therefore, though received, it bare no fruit. The innate feebleness of Ahab's character prevented him turning to account that moment of gracious visitation.

And more than this: "Ahab humbled himself before the Lord!" We cannot agree with those who consider his humiliation to have been simply hypocrisy. We believe that when they stood face to face, the man of time and the man of eternity, in that dear-bought vineyard, the voice of his victim's blood sorely smote the heart of the guilty king. Ahab was sincere enough in clothing himself with sackcloth and walking softly. The flaw in his repentance was, that it was *partial*, not *comprehensive*: it had reference to a portion of his sins, not the whole. He would gladly have undone the murder of Naboth: he dreamt not of giving up the religion of Baal. He seems to have vainly endeavoured to couple humiliation to the true God with the tacit retention of idol-worship. And similarly, in the vast majority of cases, is it the secret retention of some one vicious habit which palsies penitence. There may be solemn convictions, a desire to be at peace with God—aye, there may be the abandonment of many evil practices; but if with all this one single sin be knowingly permitted to remain, it will render useless the giving up the rest. Cast out six devils, and keep one, and that one will bar the operations of God's Spirit, and finally call in to itself other spirits, and eventually regain entire possession of the heart. Leave Satan only a single ally within the fortress of the soul, and sooner or later that fortress will be again his own. Hence the full meaning of our Lord's command, "Be ye *perfect*;" hence the failure of so many who promise

well, and then fall back. Could we trace the secret of their spiritual declension, we should find some false god still allowed within the ivory house—some canker not wholly cut out—some corrupt passion still indulged—some *Baal* yet not cast down. To the eyes of his fellows, the man's conversion may have been complete; but the Eye which never slumbers has perceived all along that solitary iniquity dogging his steps, and foreseen the inevitable result. And thus may we make the partial repentance of Ahab, in every particular, a warning to ourselves. There are periods in *our* career, as in his, which, according as we employ them, affect the whole of our after existence. It is indeed a fearful thought, yet not less true, that eternity should thus hang upon time, yea, upon a brief instant of time. Whether a man be lost or saved will frequently depend upon the use he makes of a particular crisis. True, that every hour of our lives is an hour in which good and ill are set before us; it is also certain that there are seasons when God does more specially plead with us. We might appeal to the consciences of all, whether there have not been occasions in which you have been strongly moved to adopt greater strictness of life, and more devotional habits. Those inward suggestions are not of your own spirits; they are the Elijah-utterances which reveal the presence of the Lord of Hosts—the accents of that Voice which discovereth the foundations of the round world, crying in the very depths of the inner man, as of old to the shrouded dead, "I say unto thee, Arise." Just as there are hours of fierce temptation, when Satan is more than usually near, when, it may be, he does not leave one of his lying spirits to assail, but comes himself—himself, in all the crafty power of his infernal sovereignty, to make a desperate effort to win us for a prey unto his teeth; so are there minutes of ineffable calm, when the grace of baptism stirs sensibly within—when the most world-hardened man is strangely visited with a gush of tenderness, as the recollection of days when he believed frankly, and prayed with simplicity, and shrank from pollution, steals across him, and he is half-moved to break through his dry crust of apathy, and fling himself on his knees before God, as in his childish days, and vow to forsake all evil, and follow all good.

Now we would not only have you feel, whenever old times, and old faces, and old words do thus return in their force upon you, making your heart soft, and checking you in some idle career or vicious excess, not only that it is verily the Spirit of God communing with your spirits, but that your whole future, both here and after death, may depend upon two things,—whether you have firmness of purpose to abide by the suggestions of those whisperings of the Holy One, or whether you will permit again the noises of this earth to drown the celestial voice, and counter-blasts of passion and folly to drag you back into the slough of worldliness and indifference;—and whether, secondly, you have strength to wrench yourself, not from one or two, but from *every* sinful practice, to fling *every* idol to the moles and to the bats; not only to put on sackcloth for Naboth, but to cast away Baal.

Men and brethren, may not such a moment be even now upon some of you? This season of Lent meets you as Elijah met Ahab, telling you, with a prophet's tongue, of God and judgment, speaking blessed truths of amendment, pardon, peace. If these solemn litanies, if the word of exhortation uttered from this place, be the means of awakening any—if, as you gather here week by week, the vision of God and Christ, the vision of eternity, with its many mansions for the righteous, and its prison-bars for the unrepentant, rise up clearer than it has ever done before—if there be in any heart excited the disposition (be it ever so slight) to be henceforward a religious man,—then by the remembrance of Ahab, driven to and fro like stubble before the wind, swept back into the roaring surge from the rock of penitence on which he had just planted his foot, we adjure you not to be content with having serious thoughts kindled within you, or with half-measures of amendment, but to rouse every energy, call up every faculty, to fix, deep and ineffaceable, the impress of God's hand which is upon you—to resist all those baser influences which wait, like evil angels, round the portals of this church, to draw you back as soon as you cross the threshold—to cast out *every* evil spirit which troubles you. Begin this very night your conflict with the tempter; clench the matter, as early as may be, by some decided act

which shall commit you, as it were, to the side of Christ against the world and the flesh. Why do we not look with the same contempt upon infirmity of purpose and half-measures in religion, as that with which we regard them when manifested in ordinary life? To be led by others contrary to our own judgment, to pretend to put away a portion of our offences, retaining still some cherished lust or folly, like a known traitor in the citadel, is to copy exactly the weakness of him whose terrible memorial stands imperishably upon the eternal page—a man who sold himself, above all others, to work wickedness in the sight of the Lord.

We add no more. The drift of our argument has been to urge you to a resolute choice of Christian holiness, as your rule of life—to reject at once, unreservedly, whatever will not bear the light of God's countenance, by whomsoever recommended, with whatever sanction of custom or rank it may come. Ye may do this, each and all. The question is, will ye? Ye may from this moment be hearty believers, high-principled men, boldly and openly triumphing over the world, its idle fashions, and its loose morals. Will ye so do? It needs but a strong will to make you God's for ever. Awake, awake, put on thy *strength*, O Zion! Even while we speak the shadows of time are growing more thin; the ambitions and affections on which we garner up our souls, the stars which cheer our earthly path, are fading out; and deeper and deeper beyond the hills of time waxes the light of the everlasting morning. Put on thy beautiful garments, O Christian soul! thou hast awful scenes to visit, momentous acts to perform;—to die, to stand before God, one by one to bear the searching of His eye! It is high time to awake out of sleep. Dost thou still ask, as though unwilling yet to *act*, "Watchman, what of the night?" The night cometh, and also the morning;—light is sown for the righteous, but for the weak-minded and half-hearted the blackness of darkness for ever.

SERMON X.

THE REPENTANCE OF AHAB.

BY

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THE REPENTANCE OF AHAB.

A SERMON,

PREACHED IN

THE CHURCH OF ST. GILES,
OXFORD,

ON FRIDAY, FEB. 26, 1858.

BY

HENRY PARRY LIDDON, M.A.,

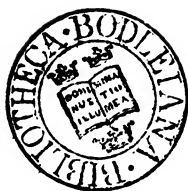
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OXFORD,

AND 377, STRAND, LONDON:

JOHN HENRY AND JAMES PARKER.

M DCCC LVIII.



A SERMON,

&c.

1 KINGS xxi. 29.

“Seest thou how Ahab humbleth himself before Me?”

SINCE these words are not merely to be found in the Book of God, but were uttered by Him, let us approach them with deep reverence. They are a Divine summons addressed to the great prophet Elijah, bidding him consider the measure of that penitence which had been wrought in the soul of the most sinful of the kings of Israel. “Seest thou how Ahab humbleth himself before Me?” He has allied himself by marriage with an idolatrous usurper^a; he has exceeded the sin of Jeroboam, by substituting for the symbolical worship of the golden calves the formal idolatry of the Tyrian Sun-god^b; he has given effect, expression, nay, supremacy to this hateful nature-worship, by setting up a temple and an altar to it in his capital; he has introduced the impure rites of the Phœnician goddess^c; he has been too weak to avert, if he would, the persecution of My prophets, too vain to execute My judgments on My enemies; and now “he humbleth himself be-

^a 1 Kings xvi. 31; cf. Jos. Ant. viii. 13. 1; and Contr. Apion. i. 19.

^b The Phœnician and Canaanitish Baal was more probably “the productive principle in nature” impersonated in the Sun, as Kiel, in loc. Movers, Phœn. i. p. 169, maintain, than the planet Jupiter, as Gesenius, Comm. on Is. ii. 335; Heb. Lex. s. v. בַּעַל. Cf. Winer Realwörterbuch i. p. 118, 119, for authorities.

^c As implied in the erection of an אֲשֵׁרָה, not a grove, (Vulg. E. V.) but an upright figure of the goddess Astarte. The etymology of the word pointing either to the qualities or figure of the goddess. Mov., Phœnizier, qu. by Ges. s. voc. 1 Kings xvi. 33.

fore Me." The three years' famine and the miracle of Carmel were alike lost upon him: he has proved insensible to the mercy which, on two separate occasions, has delivered him from Syrian invaders; he has as yet seen nothing to win him in My warnings, or in My forbearance; he has lived consistently, either to insult or to ignore Me; and now, after a crime which Gentile morality would have abhorred, "he humbleth himself before Me." Great and noteworthy spectacle of penitence, to which the prophet was invited; that he might comprehend the following message of pardon, so merciful, and yet so measured: "Because he humbleth himself before Me, I will not bring the evil in his days; but in his son's days will I bring the evil upon his house."

And with Elijah, my brethren, each member of the Church of God in all time is bidden from heaven to ponder well the subject which has been authoritatively selected for our prayerful consideration this evening. "Seest thou,"—so runs the divine message to each separate soul,—“seest thou how Ahab humbleth himself before Me?” Mark him well; for he is akin, both in his sin and in his recovery, to the mass of mankind. He neither has sinned like Saul, nor will he mourn like David. He has been pusillanimous in his sin; and he will not be other than faint-hearted in his return to God. He moves on the whole in that middle sphere of moral life which is, at best, never heroic, and at worst, something better than detestable, and which is, after all, the sphere of the mass of human kind; and if his story be less likely to lead captive the imagination, than the records of more finished sin or of deeper penitence, it is not on that account less calculated to speak home to hearts and consciences with which it has so much in common, and to which it speaks in tones so plain and yet so awful.

1. Let it then, first of all, be observed that the repentance of Ahab, so far as it went, was a real repentance. He was not, as some have thought, simply and from the first a hypocrite^d. Ahab did really traverse the first few steps of

^d Kiel (Comment. in loc.) attributes this opinion to the Fathers generally. But cf. S. Chrysostom, (Exp. in Ps. vii. § 13; Ad Theodor. Laps. i. § 6; Hom. ii.

that blessed but bitter path by which the fallen sinner must return to God. His, I say, was a real act of self-humiliation, so real as to be recognised in heaven, and to avert a measure of temporal judgment; it was something more than a garb of sackcloth, and spare diet, and hard nights, and a subdued and unkingly bearing. We dare not pronounce it "feigned," this penitence of Ahab; for the "Word of God, who is quick and powerful, and sharper than a two-edged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discernor of the thoughts and intents of the heart," has Himself attested its sincerity: "Seest thou how Ahab humbleth himself before Me?"

Now let me ask, what was there in Ahab's conduct and bearing which justifies the expression, "he humbleth himself before Me?" First of all, there is evidently a measure of that "fear of God" which is the "beginning" of true spiritual "wisdom." Ahab sincerely believed that God's judgments, as announced to him by Elijah, would overtake him. He might have remembered the solemn curse in which Ahijah had, half a century before, predicted the ruin of the house of Jeroboam; he must have heard, too, how with the same terrible formulary Jehu had, in later years, prophesied the extinction of the family of Baasha. And the accomplishment of these curses was yet fresh in the memory of Israel. The same words were now uttered against himself, and by a greater prophet: as if they had already become liturgical, and were handed down in the prophetic school, to be produced whenever the utmost penalties of God's wrath were to be launched against kings of especial wickedness: "Him that dieth of Ahab in the city the dogs shall eat; and him that dieth in the field shall the fowls of the air eat." Ahab listened and trembled; he knew that in the cases of his predecessors this word of God "had not returned unto him empty, but had accomplished that whereunto He had sent it."

de Pœnit. § 3); S. Ambros. (de Nabuth. 17.); S. Jerome, (Ep. 84, de Morte Fabiolæ; Ep. 90, ad Rusticum de Pœnitentia), etc. It will, however, be found stated in Calvin, (Instit., lib. iii. c. 3, § 25,) with whose conception of grace it would, perhaps, more naturally harmonize.

• Heb. i. 12.

^f Ps. iii. 10.

^g 1 Kings xxi. 24: cf. xiv. 19; xxi. 4.

^h Is. liv. 11.

But so to believe in and fear God's threatened judgments is itself a gift of His grace, for which the sinner may well be thankful. Too often, O my Divine Redeemer, "Thy judgments are far above out of his sight, and therefore defieth he all his enemies. He hath said in his heart, Tush, I shall never be cast down: there shall no harm happen unto meⁱ." Too often, like Amos, Thy ministers must mourn over those who, on the threshold of destruction, say, "The evil shall not overtake or prevent us^k." Too often do Thy creatures speak of Thee as if Thou hadst retired from the world which Thou hast made to rule and to redeem, by asking, as in the days of Malachi, "Where is the God of judgment^l?" "Search," brethren, "Jerusalem itself with candles," penetrate the dark corners of the Church of Jesus by the light of His Spirit and His law, and you will still find multitudes who are "settled on their lees," who say in their hearts, "The Lord will not do good, neither will He do evil^m."

The sense of sin is often so benumbed, the belief in God as present, living, and ruling on His own world, so precarious, the spiritual sight so darkened, that men actually speak of the age of divine judgments and extraordinary providences as they would speak of the heroic age, as of a thing past and gone, along with the poetry and the ignorance of earth's earlier civilization. They have discovered, forsooth, that God works ordinarily by laws; and then they argue as if He could not supersede them, as if He had forged a chain which should limit His freedom, or delegated His power to agencies which forthwith banished Him to heaven. And self-love is but too ready to avail itself of the aberrations of reason—to whisper that there is "no" certain "promise" of Christ's coming in judgment; that what has been still ever will be; that sins long unpunished may still be persevered in with impunity, and that judgments long suspended will never really fall upon the guilty. How often, dear brethren, have *we* thus stifled the word of an Elijah, speaking to conscience with the authority of heaven, the warning word of Christ's ministers,—or of a friend, or of an example of self-devotion, eloquent in the silent urgency of its reproaches,—or of a

ⁱ Ps. x. 5, 6.^k Amos ix. 10.^l Mal. ii. 17.^m Zeph. i. 12.

severe earthly trial, or of a reverse of circumstances, or of a sickness, or even of plain tokens of approaching death! How often, O my Redeemer, have we failed to hear Thy sacred Voice borne on in whispers of mercy to us from amidst the trees of life's garden, by "hardening our hearts as in the provocation, as in the day of temptation in the wilderness, when our fathers tempted Thee^a!" How highly dost Thou teach us to prize this fear of Thy judgments, which Ahab truly felt, in bidding us consider the penitence of Nineveh, repenting at the preaching of Jonah, and escaping in consequence the wrath of God^o!

Besides this, we must remark that many who truly fear the wrath of God, yet fail in their endeavours after penitence, through their extreme anxiety to justify and exculpate themselves. They do not breast the question of their personal sins: they take refuge in the thought of the superior wickedness of others, or of their own remaining good points of character; and then, more or less reassured, they endeavour, even in the presence of the All-holy, to palliate that from which He shrinks with loathing and with hatred. They have more or less of that temper which is so finished and so hateful in the Pharisee. Even on their knees, "they are going about to establish their own righteousness, not submitting themselves to the righteousness of God^p." But Ahab is silent—not because he has nothing to acknowledge, but because he knows himself to be so simply and altogether wicked, that he has nothing to say. He will confess his consummate wickedness as emphatically as possible, and in the presence of his court and of his subjects; he will go abroad as a criminal and a penitent in a garb eloquent as to the extent of his guilt and the reality of his penitential agony. "And it came to pass, when Ahab heard these words (of Elijah), that he rent his clothes, and put sackcloth upon his flesh, and fasted, and lay in sackcloth, and went softly^q." Say not, dear brethren, that that rough garb, that spare diet, those nights of hardship, that crushed and broken mien, are altogether the mere habit of an Eastern clime and a primitive age, or the hope of the heartless formalist, the refuge of the

^a Ps. xciv. 8, 9. ^o St. Matt. xii. 41. ^p Rom. x. 3. ^q 1 Kings xxi. 27.

despairing hypocrite. Rather are they the language of human nature, intelligible to all ages, and to all hearts—of nature when grace has touched it, and opened upon it a vision of the terrible justice of the Supreme Being, and of its own deformity. Here is all that is recorded of the penitence of Ahab ; and we dare not underrate it, since we are desired by Him to whom it was offered, to recognise in it that which solicited and obtained His mercy. “Seest thou how Ahab humbleth himself before Me ?” he does not deny his sin ; he does not think himself hardly or unjustly dealt with ; he has not a word to say against the sentence uttered against him, on the score of its being too precipitate or too severe : but he crouches in terror, as he gazes for one moment upon the heights of My uncreated holiness, as he glances down the abyss of My unfathomed judgments,—and then he surrenders himself to the first irresistible instincts of penitence, and “humbleth himself before Me.”

2. My dear brethren, only if you have never sinned deeply—which God grant—or if, having sinned, you have never been true penitents—will you have failed to adore that wonder-working grace of your God, which was honoured by the humiliation of sinful but penitent Ahab. For, indeed, the question must have already occurred to you, how it was that where there was so much, there was less than that full meed of repentance to which final acceptance is vouchsafed. Wherein was Ahab’s penitence deficient ? At what point does he cease to be an example, and become a fearful warning ? This is the question.

Now, unquestionably, a fear of God’s power is the first instinct of a soul convinced of sin. But where grace is not resisted, there supervenes at once a deeper and more absorbing sentiment—the perception of His Fatherly character Whom the sinner has outraged, and consequently of the hatefulness of that which has offended Him. It now seems less terrible to have offended the Judge of quick and dead, than to have wronged the universal Father ; less heavy to bear the indignation of the Omnipotent, than to face the wrath of the Lamb. The soul does not merely cry, “If Thou, Lord, wilt be extreme to mark what is done amiss, O Lord, who

may abide it?" but she utters with deeper anguish, "Against Thee only have I sinned, and done this evil in Thy sight;"—"There is mercy with Thee: *therefore* shalt Thou be feared;"—"Father, I have sinned against heaven and before Thee, and am no more worthy to be called Thy son: make me as one of Thy hired servants."

This, I say, my brethren, is something clearly beyond a fear of God's judgments, or an acknowledgment of guilt; it is a broken heart,—it is contrition. It is that "worthy lamenting of our sins, and acknowledging our wickedness," which, through the Blood of His Son, "obtains from the God of all mercy perfect remission and forgiveness¹." It is that temper of the soul which eyes God's neglected love, rather than His insulted power; which is penetrated with a hatred of its own ingratitude, rather than with dismay at its own imprudence; which conceals nothing, palliates nothing, deprecates nothing—which hates and fears sin the more, if it be unpunished, and which welcomes punishment as in some sense a minister of mercy. "Behold this selfsame thing," says St. Paul, "that ye sorrowed after a godly sort, what carefulness it wrought in you, yea, what clearing of yourselves, yea, what indignation, yea, what fear, yea, what vehement desire, yea, what revenge²!" The sinner "repents in dust and ashes," because he "abhors himself³." But there is nothing in Ahab's subsequent conduct to shew that he had attained to anything deeper than a fear of God's judgments, and an acknowledgment of his own guilt. It would seem that he feared the consequences of sin; but that by loving God he hated sin itself, is more than we can venture to suppose. And there are some very serious reasons for believing the contrary.

(a.) For, first of all, a true hatred of past sins will at all cost put them away, and cut off the occasions which lead to them. "Ephraim shall say, what have I to do any more with idols⁴?" But do we read of Ahab that he destroyed the temples of the Sun, or that he discouraged the impure superstition of Astarte, or that he restored Naboth's vineyard to his family, or that he banished the impious Jezebel to her Sidonian home? The silence of Scripture on these points is

¹ Collect for Ash-Wednesday. ² 2 Cor. vii. 11. ³ Job xlii. 6. ⁴ Hos. xiv. 8.

emphatic, and taken in connexion with what follows in the course of the history, as to his judicial blindness and final impenitence, obliges us to conclude that the repentance of Ahab was a transient though real paroxysm of the soul, stimulated, indeed, by terror, to attempt a confession of sin and deprecation of Divine justice, but wholly uninfluenced by that love of God which leads men to hate sin because God hates it, and to loathe "even the garments spotted by the flesh".

(β.) Again, the contrite sinner is concerned not merely for the love of God, which he has wronged, but for the glory of God, which he has obscured. Sin, in its essence, is the negation of God, for it is the breaking of that law which reflects His necessary perfections: and therefore all sins, although in various degrees, rob God of His glory,—limit for a time, although by His own permission, His moral supremacy; as they would, if we could conceive their being indefinitely unchecked, ultimately result in His annihilation. And therefore the truly repentant sinner is always sensitively anxious to repair the dishonour which sin has occasioned to his insulted God; and to enthrone Him as a King, not merely in the sanctuary of his own heart, but far and wide in the hearts of others,—to proclaim Him in the habits of a family, in the customs of a neighbourhood, aye, if it may be, in the institutions of a country,—that His triumph, and His glory, even in the eyes of those who do not love Him, may be as palpable and absolute as possible. We know how the energy of a penitence like this, burning to make reparation to that Uncreated Love,² which had been so long unknown or forgotten, has impetuously carried saints to the apostolate of the world and to the crown of martyrdom. Late in life, the great St. Paul could never forget how he—as it seemed, the "chief" of "sinners"—had been chosen, not for any merits of his own, but that "in him," as in a masterpiece of eternal mercy, "Christ Jesus might shew forth all long-suffering".³ That his affections should have been so long

² S. Jude 23.

³ Cf. the spirit of the well-known and beautiful passage in S. Aug. Conf. x. 27: "Sero Te amavi, pulchritudo, tam antiqua et tam nova. . . Tetigisti me, et exarsi in pacem Tuam."

⁴ 1 Tim. i. 16.

bestowed elsewhere; that his intellect should have been matured, yet in ignorance of the Only Truth; that he should have lived so many years, and so energetically, yet not for God,—his one end, his everlasting rest,—this was to the apostle a motive for exertion, in the cause of God, which made all human rest unquiet, and all sacred labour, rest. “The life that I now live in the flesh, I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me:” and the object of that life was, that “God in all things might be glorified in Jesus Christ.” But in Ahab, alas! there is no symptom of the principle of this finished work—of such a measure of it, I mean, as was possible under the law, and as is found in David. *Self*—not God—was Ahab’s centre still: he trembled at judgments which would light upon *himself*; and on the same principle he was unequal to sacrifices which were painful to *self*, however necessary to his Master’s honour. How could he brave the popular enthusiasm which in degraded Israel would rally round the Baal-worship, if he attempted its suppression? How could he expose his government to the charge of inconsistency, by restoring the inheritance of Naboth? How could he banish Jezebel, and with the main incentive to idolatry lose the master-spirit which had dictated and executed so many measures with consummate ability and equal wickedness? Was he then to make his palace desolate, to abandon his possessions, to risk his kingly character and his throne? was he to invest with honours, and a position, the prophet who had so notoriously defied and denounced him? Such, indeed, was the sacrifice which was required for the due maintenance of God’s interests in Israel, and for the due promotion of His glory. But it was impossible to Ahab: impossible, because, although he believed and feared God’s justice,—as the devils do; although he confessed his sins, as sinners will often do when their sins are already notorious;—yet he did not love Him who is the Object of all sin, as truly as He is the Source of sanctity,—as do penitents when they break their hearts beneath the Cross of Christ, to rise clothed in His enjewelled robe of righteousness and in their right mind.

3. And this brings me to the closing enquiry which the subject invites, viz., whether we can detect in the case of

Ahab, how it was that he went so far as he did, but no further, on the road to penitence and to peace? In some cases the master-motive, which warps the will and frustrates the work of grace, seems plain to us: as was the love of wealth in the rich young man; or of the world, in Demas; or of high position, in Agrippa. More frequently, it is altogether hidden among the secrets of our predestination; and while we know certainly that God "desires not the death of a sinner, but rather that he should turn from his wickedness and live;" and that we ourselves are ultimately answerable for the destinies which He, nevertheless, foresees to await us severally hereafter; yet still it is a solemn thought which must occur to most men who think seriously at all,—what is that hidden cause which determines this man, and that, to act so differently, when God speaks, and truth and holiness flash before them? It may be a subtle influence, which has never made itself felt before, will cramp the soul's energies at a time like this; it may be a deep fissure in the character never probed before will suddenly yawn open and reveal its weakness; it may be a smothered lie, or a treachery to past guidance, and the light within us, which at such times seems to strike the balance of destiny: but these things the Eternal Spirit alone perfectly searches now, although they will in each instance be one day proclaimed. But in Ahab's case, it would seem that we can, at all events, determine thus much—that the paramount influence at the time came from without, and not from within him. This, indeed, was originally his own fault: but I am speaking of the state in which he was found at this the crisis of his probation. Evil had emasculated even his natural character, and had shaped itself, as is often the case, into a form of abject moral weakness. Mark his pusillanimous deference to Benhadad; see him quail before Elijah; observe how he disguises himself before the battle of Ramoth-Gilead,—and you will understand why, when the Bible says that "there was none like unto Ahab, which did sell himself to work wickedness in the sight of the Lord," it adds in explanation—"whom Jezebel his wife stirred up¹." She stands

¹ 2 Kings xxi. 24.

behind him, as an incarnation of the Evil One—a being with a will utterly averse from God, and intensely bent upon accomplishing the misery of those who yet halt upon the threshold of destruction. Not simply the slave of evil, but its propagandist and apostle, she overrules the indecision and the timidity of her husband by a resolution which is shaken by no doubts, and to which all the energies of her soul are duly subordinated. She rivals, in her inflexible and ruthless energy, those majestic creations of grace who have no will but That of God, and whose being is consistently devoted to Its expression. Accordingly, hers is the hand which cuts off the prophets of the Lord^a, hers the table which feasted the idolatrous prophets^b, hers the threat which banishes Elijah to Beersheba,—above all, hers the intellect which planned and the will which achieved the foul murder of Naboth. Can we doubt, though we are not expressly told it, that that same unfeminine and dauntless will which had so habitually controlled the weak and wicked king of Israel once more coiled itself desperately around him, as at the prophet's words he was rising from his wretchedness to light and peace, that at this turning-point of his probation it might assert once and for ever his subjection to the kingdom of hell and of death? Such, at least, would appear to be the judgment of St. Ambrose, who answers the question how it was that God's promise not to bring evil upon the house of Ahab until his son's days, was to be reconciled with the fact of his violent death at Ramoth-Gilead, by bidding us "reflect that he had Jezebel for a wife, by whose will he was instigated to sin . . . and whose influence extinguished his penitential feelings^c."

Oh! my brethren, why has the Almighty Creator enabled us to act as we can upon each other—to project upon kindred natures those flashes of intellect, that ready wit, that interchange of tenderness and sympathy, by which soul binds and is bound to soul? Why, but that these avenues of personal influence may be as the joints and bands of Christ's Body

^a 1 Kings xviii. 4.

^b 1 Kings xviii. 19.

^c S. Ambr. de Nabutha, c. 17, ed. Ben. I. 587. Cf. S. Chrys. de Virg., c. 46, vol. i. p. 373.

mystical, drawing up His weaker members through the faithful efforts of His true servants to a more perfect service and an intenser love?

How terrible, then, the perversion, when the "spirit that now worketh in the children of disobedience^d," our great, our untiring enemy, has intrenched himself in a soul, and can direct upon the moral world the play of those marvellous faculties which were formed for God. Satan has indeed been long at his work, and is not wanting in resources; he can enlist recognised disciples or occasional victims in his service; he can, as it were, feel the pulse of his antagonist, and stay his hand, and bide his time; but, brethren, he never *can* rest from his purpose, nor will he fail to make the most of his earliest opportunity. We may imagine how Jezebel bent adroitly, almost as if in sympathy, to the first burst of penitential agony in her husband's soul—how she tenderly cautioned him against overwrought feelings and needless anxiety—how she deprecated any extreme religious enthusiasm; and then, as she felt her way, how she ventured to rally him with a slight touch of delicate sarcasm on the sackcloth, and his other marks of penitence, and then, as his heart gradually closed up against God, how she launched an invective against the prophet—perhaps overshot the mark,—retracted,—yet on the whole succeeded in deepening some ray of prejudice or of hatred; meanwhile, now strengthening her influence by a protestation of passionate affection, now winning his admiration by a shrewd conjecture, or a playful sally, or an animated criticism of the person of her opponent, till at last she could advance boldly to the assault, and denounce Him by name before Whom Ahab had bent in terror, and openly deride her husband's penitence as a weak and worthless superstition. As Leighton observes, "The grace of God in the heart of man is as a tender plant in an unkindly soil^e:" and this is especially the case when the Divine work is in its infancy. If Ahab ever struggled to maintain his fear of God, and to continue and deepen the course on which he had entered, it can have been but for a moment; he soon sank vanquished

^d Eph. ii. 2.

^e Com. on S. Peter, c. i, verse 1.

by the more than human energy of his foe, to await his final reprobation.

Oh! my brethren, Jezebel and her victim are not mere figures of history who have played their sad part in the drama of life and passed away. Surely at this moment they are living and conscious spirits, noting, from their place in God's universe, His slow preparations for judgment, and anticipating—dare we even think with what feelings?—their everlasting doom. Do they not speak from their eternity to us, who are yet the sons of time, almost as audibly as if it were permitted them to pierce the veil and “testify to us, lest we also come to that place of torment?” Do they not warn us, the one lest we use personal influence to the everlasting ruin of souls, the other lest we admit the play of such influence upon ourselves? Do they not bid us, the one to fear nothing more than what often passes for the pardonable license of conversation—that quiet sneer at Christ's cause or at His servants, which may have for ever chilled a soul in the first fervour of its conversion, and robbed it of its endless peace;—the other to take no counsel as to our religious course, of those whom we do not in our hearts respect, yet who may, from past circumstances, have acquired an influence over us, and to dread nothing less than the looks and words of men when once for all, as we trust, we have in truth and deed given our hearts to God?

And, to glance once more at our text,—“Seest thou how Ahab humbleth himself before Me?” “If,” argues S. Gregory, “the penitence of a reprobate king, who was so afraid of losing this present world, was accepted before God, so far as to defer an earthly penalty, how must the holy sorrow of His chosen ones please Him, whose only anxiety is lest they should lose Him for ever?” We cannot but note, even in this dispensation of judgment, how truly our Almighty Father “willeth not the death of a sinner, but rather that he should turn from his sin and be saved.” How delicate is His ear,

¹ “In quibus verbis Domini pensandum est quomodo ei in electis suis mœror amaritudinis placeat qui amittere timent Deum, si sic Ei et in reprobo pœnitentia placuit, qui amittere timebat præsens sæculum.”—S. Greg. in Ezek., lib. i. Hom. x. 44, vol. i. p. 1280, Ed. Ben.

how open to the first breathings of sorrow; how anxious is He to make the most of what is at best so miserably imperfect, and to encourage the faintest efforts by the largest possible reward! How does our Lord on this occasion, as S. Chrysostom observes, "Himself become the advocate of His servant, and condescend to plead with man for man!" He who was such under the law, is none other than that Infinite Charity Who has since come in the flesh, that He might die for sinners. Oh! my brethren, if He was such even then, what must He needs be now? If Jews knew Him to be thus "long-suffering and of tender mercy," what must He be to penitent Christians, as He pleads for them and with them from His Cross, but that Fountain of all mercy, that Stay and Refuge of the soul, no less than its Centre and its Sun, Who, as the Church says of the eternal Father, "declareth His almighty power most chiefly in shewing mercy and pity^h," and Who had only thus to be "lifted up from the earth," that, by an irresistible attraction, He might "draw all men unto Him!"ⁱ

O Christian brethren, O imperishable spirits, whom Jesus has Himself created, and for whom He died, rest not, I pray you, for any fear of man, in your work of penitence, till He has taught you, not merely to fear, but utterly to love Him; till you have tasted, in all its preciousness, of that "plenteous redemption" which is the gift of your crucified, your everlasting Lord.

^ε S. Chrys. De Poen. Hom. ii. 3, Ed. Gaume, vol. ii. p. 343: Βαβαί, δεσπότης δούλου συνήγορος γίνεται. καὶ ἀπολογεῖται Θεὸς ἀνθρώπῳ ὑπὲρ ἀνθρώπου.

^h Collect for the Eleventh Sunday after Trinity.

ⁱ S. John xii. 32.

SERMON XI.

THE CONVICTIONS OF BALAAM.

BY

EDWARD BICKERSTETH, M.A.,

VICAR OF AYLESBURY, AND ARCHDEACON OF BUCKINGHAM.

THE CONVICTIONS OF BALAAM.

A SERMON,

PREACHED IN

THE CHURCH OF ST. EBBE,
OXFORD,

ON WEDNESDAY, MARCH 3, 1858.

BY

EDWARD BICKERSTETH, M.A.,

VICAR OF AYLESBURY, AND ARCHDEACON OF BUCKINGHAM.

12.

OXFORD,

AND 377, STRAND, LONDON:

JOHN HENRY AND JAMES PARKER.

M DCCCLVIII.



A SERMON,

&c.

NUMBERS xxiii. 10.

“Let me die the death of the righteous, and let my last end be like his.”

THESE words occur, you will at once remember, in the midst of that strain of glowing predictions in which Balaam announced the future triumph and blessedness of Israel: and I have chosen them for our consideration on this occasion, because they appear to me to exhibit in a remarkable degree the convictions of that inconsistent man. But before I enter upon this subject, it may be well that we remind ourselves of the leading circumstances of his history, and the more prominent features of his character.

The Israelites were now approaching the promised land, and had reached the country of Moab, over which Balak was king. Already the kingdoms of Bashan and of the Amorites had fallen before them; and as the course of their journey led them to the borders of Moab, the fame of their successes amazed and distressed the people. Now it was the custom of heathen nations solemnly to devote their enemies to destruction before entering upon war with them. Accordingly, Balak sent for Balaam, that he might come and curse the children of Israel. Balaam lived on the banks of the Euphrates, where the knowledge of God seems still to have lin-

gered, although almost obscured by superstition and idolatry. We may, I think, fairly conclude that Balaam was a prophet, however much he may have perverted God's gifts. We find that he was well acquainted with the name of the God of Israel; for when Balak's messengers first came to him, he desired them to lodge with him that night, that he might enquire of the Lord,—that is, Jehovah, the God of Israel. Moreover, God is represented as having revealed Himself to Balaam. It must have been generally known that Balaam had direct communications with Jehovah; and this will probably explain the anxiety of Balak to secure his services on this occasion*. For if Balak believed that he was a prophet of the true God, it was natural that he should wish, through Balaam's instrumentality, to enlist on his side the favour of that God whom he knew to be the God of Israel, and whom even natural religion taught him to dread. Balak's ambassadors arrived with the rewards of divination in their hands; but when Balaam had received their message, he refused to answer them until there had been opportunity for a Divine communication. In the stillness of night the Lord God came near to him, and solemnly forbade him to go, assuring him that the people were blessed. With this answer the messengers were dismissed; but Balak was not readily discouraged, and understanding, probably, the character of Balaam, he sent again a more honourable embassy, with larger offers of reward. For the moment Balaam seems to have been firm; but the rewards now proffered were too tempting to be lightly rejected. Instead, therefore, of taking the only safe course, and at once remanding Balak's servants, he pressed them to remain with him another night, that he might know what more the Lord would say. But what more could he expect from God? Jehovah had already in the clearest terms declared His will, and Balaam knew that He

* See Dr. Waterland on the History and Character of Balaam.

was "not a man that He should repent." It was an awful crisis in the prophet's history, when, professing only to know more of God's will, but secretly desiring to advance his own worldly ends, he heard that voice now saying to him, "Go with them; but yet the word which I shall say unto thee, that shalt thou do^b." He eagerly caught at this permission, forgetting that it was given in anger, and hoping that thus he might even yet, by some indirect means, accomplish Balak's object, and thus possess himself of the desired reward. But he was not permitted even now to pursue his error without warning. God sent an angel to intercept him in his way; nay, even the very animal on which he rode was endued with miraculous energy, and with human accents reproved him for his perverseness. He was rebuked for his iniquity: "the dumb ass," as St. Peter tells us, "speaking with man's voice, forbad the madness of the prophet^c." The history of that remarkable occurrence is substantially related in the Book of Numbers; and both the manner of the narrative, and the allusion made to it by St. Peter, forbid us to understand it otherwise than as a literal occurrence, providentially ordained by God as a further hindrance to Balaam in his presumptuous career.

The wilful prophet, however, pursued his journey, and was eagerly met by Balak, who led him the following day to one of the highest points of the mountains of Moab. From hence he could see the tents of Israel, as the people lay encamped beneath him in the valley of the Jordan; and here he endeavoured, by sacrifices and enchantments, to obtain that permission which had already been refused. But he was continually frustrated by Omnipotence, and constrained to utter that which was the very opposite to his design. Again and again did he make the effort; but whether from Baal, or Pisgah, or Peor, his designs were overruled; and on each

^b Numb. xxii. 20.

^c 2 Peter ii. 16.

occasion, instead of cursing the people, he poured forth blessings, each rising in richness and in grandeur; until at last, under a plenary influence of the Spirit, he foretold in rapid succession the future victories of Israel over the nations around him; and looking far onwards through the vista of ages, he announced the coming of the Messiah, and the rising from out of Jacob of that Star which never shall set, and of that Sceptre which shall never be broken.

Well would it have been for Balaam if he had yielded up his affections as well as his understanding to that mighty power which then wrought within him. But, alas! though his eyes were opened, his heart remained unsubdued; and we soon turn to a yet darker page in his history. Baffled in these endeavours to secure the bribe of Balak, he now sought by other means to accomplish his object. He knew that Israel was in favour with God, and that there was one thing, and one thing only, which could cause this favour to be withdrawn. He now, therefore, devised the cruel and cowardly plan of placing temptations before them, and endeavouring to seduce them into iniquity, assuring the Moabites that the only possible way of gaining an advantage over them, would be to tempt them to sin, and so to make a breach between them and their God. This stratagem was but too successful; and Israel was seduced into both fleshly and spiritual sin, which ended in the destruction of 24,000 of the people by an immediate visitation from God.

But the day of recompense at last reached this guilty man. He had not been long possessed of "the wages of unrighteousness," when the order was given to Moses and the Israelites to go forth against their seducers and smite them. And we read in the Book of Numbers^d that "they slew the kings of Midian, beside the rest of them that were slain; namely, Evi, and Rekem, and Zur, and Hur, and Reba, five

^d Numb. xxxi. 8.

kings of Midian. *Balaam also, the son of Beor, they slew with the sword.*"

Now the most remarkable point in the character of Balaam is this—that he wanted to do what he knew to be sinful, although he would not dare to do it in the face of an express and positive command. He could not act in direct opposition to the dictates of conscience, although, through his love of money, excited by the promised reward, he laboured hard to accomplish his object by indirect means. He thoroughly knew what was right, and yet his whole desire was to be permitted to do what was wrong; so that at one moment he seemed a conscientious man, and at another utterly abandoned and depraved. He did not dare openly to transgress the command of God. He felt inward checks and restraints of conscience, which he was afraid altogether to resist; and yet his whole aim was to devise some indirect means by which he might reconcile his wickedness with his duty. He was a highly gifted man, and yet these gifts had no power to subdue the low and earthly desires of his heart. He was not an absolutely reckless man, for he evidently weighed carefully the conflicting motives of interest and duty. Nor was he an utterly callous and hardened man; for had he been this, he would not have taken so much pains to avoid a direct breach of a positive precept^e. We may even add, that with eternity opening before him, and with the full view of the future rewards and blessedness of the righteous, he could deliberately strive to oppose the declared will of God. For it was in the midst of his prophecy, and when he had before him a lively view of his approaching end, it was then that he uttered the earnest wish of my text,—“Let me die the death of the righteous, and let my last end be like his.”

Such, I think, are the more prominent features of Balaam's character. But in order that we may make a more profitable

^e See Bishop Butler's Seventh Sermon.

use of his example, we will consider him—(1.) as swayed by worldly interests; (2.) as the possessor of great and extraordinary gifts; and (3.) as acted upon by strong religious convictions.

I. It is very evident that the ruling passion of Balaam was covetousness. It is so described by St. Peter^f, where he speaks of certain persons who had forsaken the right way, and were gone astray, “following the way of Balaam the son of Bosor, who loved the wages of unrighteousness.” And to the same purpose St. Jude^g speaks of those who “ran greedily after the error of Balaam for reward.” This, then, was his prevailing interest; but conscience struggled so powerfully within him, that in the pursuit of that interest he did not dare to run counter to a direct and express command of God. And let us not suppose that this character, strange and paradoxical though it may appear, is an uncommon one. For, indeed, is not the world quite full of men who are urged on by present interest to do what they know to be wrong, only endeavouring that in the doing of it they may find some excuse for their disobedience? Remember, the case of Balaam is not that of a man who under the influence of strong and momentary passion allows the greater and more distant interests to yield to the nearer and the less; it is that of one who, with a calm and distinct perception of the truth, deliberately casts about for indirect means of acting contrary to that truth, when it opposes his interests. And if this be indeed so, how many are the examples of this grievous inconsistency! Do we not find the features of this character at every turn? What! are there none who, though they dare not openly take that which does not belong to them, scruple not, by little dexterous evasions and subtle trickeries, to overreach and defraud their neighbours? Are there none who hesitate not to use indirect

^f 2 Pet. ii. 15.

^g St. Jude 11.

methods for possessing themselves of their neighbour's property, although they dare not openly rob his person? Are there none who, though they dare not utter a direct and positive falsehood, scruple not to speak with intent to deceive? And to follow out the resemblance yet further, are there not many who, living in the full determination to commit sin, are not wholly without the thoughts of death and judgment; many who, with the gold of Balak in view, are eager in the pursuit of it, only taking care to invent some excuse for their guilt, by which they contrive to cheat themselves, and perhaps half hope to cheat their God; and who, therefore, glossing over their iniquity by a religious profession, can exclaim with Balaam, "Let me die the death of the righteous, and let my last end be like his?"

And does not this explain in some degree the apparent calmness and self-control with which many men pursue their course of sin? They are not without all sense of God and of religion. They have felt within themselves, it may be, the strivings of the Holy Spirit, and God has clearly made known to them, even as He did to Balaam, the counsels of His will. But it is quite possible that by some ingenious process of self-deceit, by some religious equivocation or subterfuge, they may quiet conscience, and so commit sin, for a time, at least, with apparent freedom. We cannot fathom all the depths of a dishonest heart; but this I will venture to say, that the man who, knowing the will of God, has deliberately resolved to go against that will, will find some course open to him by which he may thus gratify his inclination, and at the same time more than half persuade himself that he is acting within the scope of the command. There is scarcely a single moral obligation which might not thus be evaded: and it frequently happens that where men are thus resolutely bent upon disobedience, the restraining influence of the Holy Spirit is gradually though imperceptibly with-

drawn, until at length, casting off this flimsy disguise, they sin presumptuously and with a high hand, and crown all by becoming, like Balaam, the tempters of others to sin. Oh! brethren, if there should be one here present who is conscious to himself of the secret intention to follow by some circuitous course that sin against which his conscience warns him, let him trace thoughtfully the downward progress of Balaam, and tremble lest in judgment God should allow him to succeed in that which is the real, though not the avowed, wish of his heart. God saw and noticed the reigning desire of Balaam; He saw that though he pretended to ask counsel of Him, his real aim was to obtain the "wages of unrighteousness." God read that aim, and answered it in judgment. Let us beware, then, how we cherish the secret wish which we know to be opposed to the will of God. He may give us our desire; but where shall be the profit of the sinful indulgence, if at the same time He withdraw His grace, and send "leanness withal into the soul^h?"

II. But I wish you, further, to consider Balaam as the possessor of extraordinary gifts. We have seen that God had bestowed upon him the gift of prophecy: but apart from this, he must have been a man of considerable intellectual power; and these natural advantages, combined with his miraculous endowments, must have given him an almost unbounded influence over the then Gentile world. We know that he had a high reputation, spreading far over Mesopotamia, and reaching even to the distant hills of Moab and of Midian. But what I pray you to mark is this—that these intellectual endowments had no power to root out of his soul one of the most sordid of passions, the love of wealth. I think it very important to notice this, because it warns us solemnly against the notion that gifts can be in any sense a substitute for grace. In these days, when the minds of men are upon the

^h Ps. cvi. 15.

stretch, and men of thought and intellect are almost idolized, it is easy to fall into the error of supposing that genius may triumph over human corruption, and that sordid passions can scarcely co-exist with great mental superiority. If such be the case, let us mark well the example of Balaam. Here is a man endowed with rare gifts of God, and yet unable to withstand the temptations to that sin which the Apostle declares to be "the root of all evil¹." Who could have supposed, as the prophet stood, wrapt in ecstasy, on the heights of Moab, that the canker-worm of covetousness was even then eating into his soul? It must have been a glorious scene, as he stood on the high peaks of Pisgah or of Peor, to watch the glances of his keen, prophetic, intellectual eye, while the Spirit of God came upon him, and he poured forth those brilliant predictions of the future strength and greatness of Israel. It is a glorious thing to us to read these prophecies, and to consider them as having, for the most part, a still further reference to the Redeemer's kingdom—to know that the Star out of Jacob has indeed appeared, and that from out of that pilgrim nation there has sprung a dominion which shall never be destroyed. Glorious indeed are these truths! But oh! how sad and bewildering is the thought that the mouth which uttered them was the organ of a sordid and deceitful heart. The true prophetic light flashed over the seer, unclouded light from the Eternal Mind. For the moment it lighted up his dark soul; but, alas! it flitted by, and left the darkness more gross than before. The prophecies have been treasured up, having contracted no error or imperfection by their passage through an unholy man; but where is he who uttered them? This question must indeed remain unanswered till the last great day. But meanwhile let us beware of presuming upon any natural endowments; nor let us ever forget, that in proportion to

¹ 1 Tim. vi. 10.

the excellency of the gift, is the necessity of humility, and watchfulness, and prayer ; lest that which, if rightly used, might have helped to lift the soul to heaven, by being abused, should only sink it down to a lower depth of infamy and ruin.

III. But, lastly, we must consider Balaam as influenced by strong religious convictions. We mark them in his anxiety to ask counsel of God—in his confession of sin when withstood by the angel—in his steady determination to obey the letter of the command—and in the earnest and impassioned wish of my text, “ Let me die the death of the righteous, and let my last end be like his.”

Now we must not suppose that in all this Balaam was altogether insincere. We have seen, indeed, that his whole aim was to try to reconcile his wickedness with his duty ; nevertheless, there were times when the better nature struggled hard within him—when he was open to good impressions, and when he earnestly desired a full participation in the glory and blessedness of God’s saints. And is not this just the case of thousands in every age ? Are there not many who, when under the influence of an awakened conscience, can melt into tears at the remembrance of past sins and negligences—many who, when the glory and the happiness of the future inheritance of God’s saints are set before them, feel a momentary desire of attaining to them ? They are borne away by the fervour of the moment, and fancy themselves in earnest. The natural man has been wrought upon, and, for the time, you might fancy him spiritual ; but the trance is over, and he is natural still.

Beware then, beloved brethren, how you trust to occasional religious thoughts and feelings. It is well that you should know what is right ; it is well that your conscience should be roused and awakened ; it is well that you should weep at the remembrance of past days of vanity and sin ; it is

well that you should feel some yearnings after those pleasures which are at God's right hand for evermore. But what avails all this goodly array of thoughts and feelings, if they pass away like the morning cloud, and are only followed by a return to the former habit of self-deceit, and of dalliance with some cherished sin? It is not well that you should know what is right, and yet be only intent upon the pursuit of what is wrong. It is not well that you should occasionally feel godly desires, and continually commit ungodly actions. It is not well that you should desire to die the death of the righteous, and yet persist in living the life of the wicked. Alas! how many there are who, thoroughly knowing what is right, still keep the glittering bribe of Balak in view; devoting all their real energies to the securing of what they long for; only attempting some process of self-deceit, by which they may hide the offence they know they are committing, and persuade themselves that their prospects are still hopeful,—while, in real truth, they are every moment drifting further and further from heaven.

I may safely assume that the wish of Balaam, expressed in the text, is the wish of every one here present. All men, whatever their present life may be, agree in the desire of attaining heaven at the last. With many this desire is probably very fluctuating and ill-defined; nevertheless, no one has altogether abandoned the hope of everlasting life. You all wish for this happiness—you all hope for it. But if so, why is this hope held with so uncertain a grasp? Why is this desire so vague and unsettled? Ask yourself candidly, and you will find that there is some lurking evil, some secret sin still holding you in bondage. The words belie the heart. You are striving to do that which our Lord has declared to be impossible: "Ye cannot serve God and Mammon^k." And here is the deceptive thing—that the wish for conversion

^k Matt. vi 24.

may be mistaken for the act of conversion; the appearance of devotion for the reality of devotion; the elevated thought, the momentary aspiration, for the real abiding work of the Spirit of the Lord. It is not enough to have stood, as it were, upon the mountain-top, and thence to have looked with passing desire upon the rich portion of God's saints. It is not enough, under the influence of some earthly enchantment, to have beheld the fair scenery of heaven floating before you like some beautiful panorama. You must come down into the plain, and be with the people of God in their trials and temptations, in their warfare and their strife, if you would share with them hereafter in their triumph and their rest. Oh! then, for the grace to make these impressions permanent, so that they may lead onwards to greater watchfulness, more earnest prayer, and more honest strivings against the besetting sin. We shall then see that without holiness none can see the Lord; and we shall see also that it is only under the Cross of Christ that we can obtain real power against sin; yea! that it is His grace alone that can subdue our stubborn will, and draw our affections to Himself.

Let it not then be in vain, my brethren, that there has been presented to us for our contemplation this evening the character of Balaam. We have seen him gradually swerving from duty under the strong temptation of earthly advantage. We have seen him the possessor of God's highest gifts, but failing to employ them to his own spiritual improvement. We have seen him capable of religious impressions, but without the grace to deepen them and make them permanent. Beloved brethren, if these, or any of these, represent to you your own special dangers, let me earnestly counsel you to shun them while yet you see them, and before you are given over to a judicial blindness. Let your secret sin be the special matter of your prayer this night, and throughout this sea-

son of Lent. Bring it continually before you in thoughts of penitence, in the secret chamber, in prayer, in the reading of God's Word, in Holy Communion. Try to recognise God as you must one day behold Him, in dreadful majesty; and then look again upon that sin which now hides Him from you—which hinders your prayers—which weakens your religious endeavours, and makes even your seasons of Communion unprofitable. Strive to look upon sin even as He looks upon it, who is of purer eyes than to behold iniquity. Strive to realize the amazing attributes of Deity; His unspotted holiness, His unbending justice, His infinite, inexhaustible love. Endeavour to love the holiness, to dread the justice, to desire the love; until, through His unspeakable mercy, you have indeed passed from out of that state of evil, into the conscious presence of your reconciled Lord. Be watchful against every path, every interest, every association which might lead you again into the snare. Aim at perfect sincerity of heart—at simple, trustful faith—at manly, straightforward obedience. Then will the Spirit of light and truth be your guide through life's weary and dangerous pilgrimage; and having, like Israel of old, passed safely through the land of the Moabite and the Midianite, you shall at length be established with everlasting security in the land of your heavenly inheritance.

SERMON XII.

THE GOODNESS OF KING JOASH.

BY

JAMES RANDALL, M.A.,

ARCHDEACON OF BERKS. ; CHAPLAIN TO THE BISHOP OF OXFORD ; AND

RECTOR OF BINFIELD, BERKS.

THE GOODNESS OF KING JOASH.

A SERMON,

PREACHED IN

THE CHURCH OF ST. MARY-THE-VIRGIN,

OXFORD,

ON FRIDAY, MARCH 5, 1858.

BY

JAMES RANDALL, M.A.,

ARCHDEACON OF BERKS.; CHAPLAIN TO THE BISHOP OF OXFORD; AND
RECTOR OF BINFIELD, BERKS.

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OXFORD,

AND 377, STRAND, LONDON:

JOHN HENRY AND JAMES PARKER.

M DCCC LVIII.



A SERMON,

&c.

2 CHRON. xxiv. 2.

“And Joash did that which was right in the sight of the Lord, all the days of Jehoiada the priest.”

THE history of Joash is fruitful of instruction to us, both as to the great value of pious and faithful counsel, and also as to the necessity of endeavouring, by God's grace, to be so firmly fixed in steadiness of religious principle and holiness of life, that we may not lean upon the staff of man's wisdom, which may be taken from us, but upon the support of God's Spirit, which never can fail us.

The early life of Joash was passed under circumstances seemingly the most favourable to his establishment in godliness. Snatched in his infancy from the murderous hands of his wicked grandmother, by what we can scarcely regard as less than a special providence of God, to keep alive, according to His promise, a lamp in the house of His servant David; hid for six years in the house of the Lord, finding there an asylum among the priests, who as a garrison in a besieged fortress kept up the worship of Jehovah, all the more dear to them, because they only seemed to be the depositaries of the true faith, while idolatry triumphed

throughout the rest of the land ; nourished by the faithful Jehoiada and his wife with all the care that was due to the hope of Israel, the destined ancestor, according to the flesh, of the Son of God, and that at the hazard of their own lives, which, as well as his, might have been sacrificed at any moment by an unlucky discovery of his existence to the queen ; fed with the sacrifices of God's altar, amid the prayers and tears of those who had no hope of safety from day to day for him or for themselves, except in their reliance upon that unchangeable word, " I have sworn once by My holiness, that I will not fail David ;" surely one would have thought that the very mind and body of Joash must have been a temple, purified and meet for a constant habitation of the Holy Spirit.

And so for a long time it seemed to be. " Joash did that which was right in the sight of the Lord all the days of Jehoiada the priest ;" all the remaining days of that long life, extended by the mercy of God towards His people, to the unusual term of a hundred and thirty years, that the ruins of the temple might be repaired, and still more, that the breaches of the people's allegiance to their God might be reconciled. And then Jehoiada died, and then it seemed as if with him the Spirit of the Lord had departed from Joash. For, " after the death of Jehoiada, came the princes of Judah, and made obeisance unto the king. Then the king hearkened unto them ; and they left the house of the Lord God of their fathers, and served groves and idols." Sad change, indeed ! that he who in his childhood had found his safety only under the shadow of Jehovah's wing, should in his age have deserted Him, and passed over to the camp of His enemies. Then followed the usual consequence of grace rejected, and sin admitted to take possession of the heart, hatred of the reprover of sin. " The Spirit of God

came upon Zechariah, the son of Jehoiada the priest, which stood above the people, and said unto them, Thus saith God, Why transgress ye the commandments of the Lord, that ye cannot prosper? Because ye have forsaken the Lord, He also hath forsaken you. And they conspired against him, and stoned him with stones, at the commandment of the king in the court of the house of the Lord. Thus Joash the king remembered not the kindness which Jehoiada his father had done to him, but slew his son."

The ingratitude of this act strikes one at the first glance as monstrous. And yet, my brethren, though I would not suppose that ingratitude often reaches so high a pitch as this, I fear the disposition to resent as an injury, not only the direct reproof in words, but even the indirect reproof of the continued holy life of former friends, from community with whom in religious feeling a sinner has cut himself off, is but too common. Think of this; for it is a great test of what may have been, or may be now, your own spiritual state. If you have formerly lived and walked in the house of God, as friends, with those whose holiness, once your joy, is now felt by you to be a reproach to your own profligacy or worldliness; if you no longer delight in their company or conversation, though you know in your conscience, that not they, but you are changed; if you can with satisfaction hear their good evil-spoken of; still more, if you can yourselves join in ridiculing their weaknesses or peculiarities, suggesting that they are probably not so good, and certainly not so wise, as they would seem to be; then you are already gone a great way toward the sin of Joash. It is a happy thing for you that you are not kings, tempted by wicked courtiers to put yourselves at the head of a people glad to be encouraged in casting off the yoke of religious restraint, and ready and willing to go any lengths to rid themselves of the

vexatious interference of those who testify against their ungodliness.

I will add, that this is a sin to which young persons are especially liable to be tempted at their first entrance into what we call *the world*. If they have had the happiness to live hitherto under religious restraint, and in the society of good people, they are to a considerable extent in the condition of our first parents in paradise, ignorant of evil: but the world spreads out evil before them, and the tempter presents it under the most attractive forms, and disguises all its really repulsive features. Too often they fail under the temptation. They lose the trusting simplicity of their young faith, the tender delicacy of their young conscience, and then they affect to despise and triumph over those who have kept the jewels that they themselves have suffered to be stolen away. They would gladly initiate their early friends in the mystery of the evil which they have learned; but the friends who will not yield to their guidance, nor follow their example, will commonly be treated by them as enemies to their pleasure, and be made outcasts from their affection.

Consider, then, how you stand disposed towards those whom you once honoured and loved for their goodness. Do you love and honour them still, though you know that you have forfeited, or deserved to forfeit, their esteem? Cherish these feelings; go back to those friends, and walk with them, as in times past, in the good old ways. But if you feel that you cannot love them as heretofore; that you are too far gone in other paths to turn again into that which they are treading, remember Joash and Zechariah; remember the blood of the faithful prophet, and true friend and counsellor, spilt by the command of his foster-brother; and know that you are giving place in your heart to that same choice of evil rather than good, that same love of the world and the

worldly-minded, in preference to the love of God and the children of God, which sank Joash to that depth of sin.

But though this is a very important, it is not the most important, lesson to be learned from this history. That lesson is, as I have already intimated, the duty of training ourselves, and those who are under our guidance, to stand alone, and not to rest upon the support of others. Alone, I mean, as to men; but not alone as to God. Rather, the more we are alone as to men, the more we shall feel the necessity and comfort of being always with Him. "The hour cometh," said our Lord, "that ye shall be scattered every one to his own, and shall leave Me alone: and yet I am not alone, because the Father is with Me^a."

Not that we should make small account of the counsel of wise and religious friends, and especially when those friends have also the authority which belongs to the ministers of God. Such counsel is of inestimable value; it is a precious gift of God to those whom He has placed in circumstances enabling them to receive and profit by it. There are two errors in this matter. On the one hand, there is the reluctance to seek religious counsel, especially from the clergy, who by their office are bound to impart it, and who, I must say, are generally ready to do so, and are grieved that those under their charge are so rarely willing to avail themselves of it, when they might very often, by even a few minutes of pastoral conversation, have their course of duty made clear to their minds, and be saved the distress of doubting before they act, and the fear, after they have acted, of having done wrong. Instances are but too common, in which, for want of such previous confidence, people have plunged themselves irrecoverably into spiritual difficulties, which have beset them

^a John xvi. 32.

for all their after-lives. The other error, of which the history before us presents so sad an example, is that of always looking to the opinion of others, and putting aside the responsibility of deciding for ourselves. The perfect use of a wise adviser is not to determine for us what we shall do in every particular case that day by day arises; but to help us to store our minds with sound principles, such as we may call up for our own direction when any emergency requires them. Whether in this respect Jehoiada's management of the early life of Joash had been defective; whether he had thought it sufficient to tell his pupil what he ought to do, and see that it was done, without training him to discern between good and evil by the exercise of his own understanding, enlightened as it should have been, under Jehoiada's teaching, by the study of the Word of God and prayer; or whether the fault was in the constitution of the pupil's mind, easy to receive any impression from those about him, and too weak to hold fast that which was good, we cannot tell.

It would rather appear, however, that the latter was the case. We can hardly suppose that Joash could have been ignorant of the duty of serving Jehovah only; or that he could have failed to perceive that the princes of Judah were leading him astray from the way in which he had so long walked safely. But he was pliable, and ready to be persuaded. He had for many years had the blessing of a counsellor whose advice he could securely follow; he had profited by that advice; he had been led by it in a course happy for himself and for his people; he had probably persuaded himself, that as he had so long been guided for his good, it would be good for him always to be guided. He had been passive, and it had gone well with him; and he did not like to undertake the trouble of resistance, and the hazard of doing wrong if he did resist.

Jehoiada was dead; the princes of Judah seemed to be his natural advisers; he would follow their advice, and cast the responsibility upon them. Thus he made even the good service of Jehoiada a snare to himself. He had had reason to confide in him; he had confided; and that with such good effect, that if he had died before Jehoiada, his name would have stood high on the roll of the best kings of Judah. But his very security, so long enjoyed, his success in his government, all helped his natural disinclination to think and act for himself, and made him a mere machine in the hands of others. Do we wonder that a person of such gentle and yielding qualities could be guilty of such an atrocious act of violence as the murder of Zechariah? Daily life is full of such instances, in which weak but well-meaning persons have been pushed into wickedness that they would themselves have abhorred, through want of firmness to oppose the will of others. Joash was tried, and found wanting; and his trial was the removal of his faithful counsellor, and the access thereby opened to advisers of a contrary disposition; men in whom there was an evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God, and who allured him in like manner to renounce his faith, and violate every feeling of justice and humanity.

Certainly there is a great difference in the natural constitution of men's minds. Some are like the creeping plant, that grows up rapidly, and yields a fair show of luxuriant leaves, but must always hang for support upon some external prop, holding fast by its tendrils to a trellis or a pole. Others are like the oak, slowly developing itself from among the meaner underwood, but gathering firmness and substance every day till it rears its head alone above the trees of the forest. When the trellis or the pole decays, the creeper must necessarily fall to the ground; the oak abides, seem-

ingly immovable in its own strength. Favourable circumstances may uphold the creeper: it may have attached itself to a castle or a rock. Unfavourable circumstances may lay low the oak: it may be blasted by the lightning, or hewn down by the woodman's axe. But there is the inherent difference of nature to begin with; and all the culture that man could bestow would never give to the creeper the sturdiness of the oak. But though man cannot change nature, God can. He made the waters of the sea to stand on an heap, that there might be a way through the deep for the ransomed to pass over. He made the blast of the furnace like a moist whistling wind upon the faces of the three holy children, so that there was not a hair of their heads singed, neither were their coats changed, nor the smell of fire passed on them. And so He can change the heart of man, and impart strength to the weakest character. How else has it happened that children and women have been proof against the most subtle and the most violent assaults of temptation, when men, proud in their reliance upon their fancied wisdom and resolution, have failed? God it is that fits the back to the burthen, or the burthen to the back. He will either guard His feeble ones from temptation, or enable them to overcome it. He can give wisdom to the simple, and courage to the faint-hearted; and manifest His power the most in helping their most seemingly hopeless infirmity.

Therefore the way to be firm in what is good, is to take God for your guide and support, and not man. "Cease ye from man, whose breath is in his nostrils; for wherein is he to be accounted of?" The counsel of good men is most valuable, and to be esteemed as a precious gift of God, and one of the chiefest means by which He enables us to discover and work out His own will. The approbation of good men is one of

the most cheering cordials with which God encourages us in our work for Him. But after all, God's counsel is that by which we must abide; His favour that which must be our desired reward. And that is what we must keep in view, if we would have consistent stability of purpose, or steadiness of conduct. No human guide can so enter into our secret thoughts, or be so acquainted with the exact posture of our circumstances, and how these work upon our minds, as to be able always to direct us with certainty. And even if he could do this while he is with us, what is to be our condition when he is separated from us by death, or even by absence? There is but one unfailing and unerring director, who is able both to teach us what is good, and to give us power to perform it. Earnest and frequent are St. Paul's warnings to his converts on this head. "It is good to be zealous always in a good thing; and not only when I am present with you." "Let every man prove his own work; and then shall he have rejoicing in himself alone, and not in another. For every man shall bear his own burthen^b." "Therefore, my beloved, as ye have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God that worketh in you both to will and to do of His good pleasure^c."

How, then, are we to reconcile these two things, the duty of seeking, and in due measure following, the counsel of our good instructors, of our natural or our spiritual elders, and the duty of standing fast for ourselves in the counsel of God? Is there any real contradiction between them? or can they be brought into such harmonious relation to each other, that we may beneficially fulfil both?

I think we must arrive at the solution of the question in

^b Gal. vi. 4, 5.

^c Phil. ii. 12, 13.

this way. All true knowledge, and wisdom, and prudence, comes from God. Men are in various ways, and in different degrees, His instruments for the conveyance of it to other men. The father to his children, the teacher to his scholars, the priest to his flock, all are, or ought to be, the representatives of God to those who by birth or condition are under their instruction. They ought to be listened to as such; yet always under this limitation, that their office is, so to represent God to us, as to bring us to Him, not to keep us from Him. Just as the office of the moon is to transmit the reflected light of the sun to the dark side of the earth; but if the moon comes between the earth and the sun, it does but darken the earth, by intercepting from it the rays that beam from that great light which is the source of light to both: so the parent, the teacher, or the priest, is to stand for God towards the child, the pupil, or the private Christian, so far as their imperfect knowledge or their spiritual needs require; but not so as to eclipse God, or to make them forget, but on the contrary, to make them anxiously remember that to God, and not to man, they are answerable in the last resort for their deeds.- If they are not taught this, they will be perpetually shaping their conduct according to what such a man will think of them; a dangerous ambition even of a good man's praise, considering how uncertain must be the judgment of the best and wisest man concerning another's heart. Such excessive confidence must be a snare both to the guide and to the person guided. To the guide, because it supposes in him, and requires from him, a perfection of discernment which is not granted to man; to the person guided, because it leads him to rest satisfied with approving himself to an inferior judgment, when he ought to be looking to the sentence of the Judge that knoweth all things. Therefore it must be a matter of most careful watchfulness to all those who by

nature or office are the spiritual guides of others, to guard against any misunderstanding as to the just limits of their authority, and of the others' deference to it: and to the persons who are, or might and ought to be, under such guidance, whether, on the one hand, they have made the most diligent use of such advantages for knowing the will of God as have been thereby brought within their reach; and whether, on the other hand, they have done what under man's advice has been rightly done by them with a sincere eye to the service of God, and not rather in the desire of pleasing men, though those men should be confessedly wise and good. The more we advance in years and knowledge, the greater must be our vigilance upon this point. We shall never be exempt from the duty of seeking good counsel, as we have opportunity; but it will become our duty to sift the counsel, and try it by the Word of God, and so make it our own, before we commit ourselves to act upon it. The judgment of good men, and the opinion that they may form of our conduct, is not by any means to be disregarded. Their judgment, due allowance being made for the human infirmity that besets it, is one of the ways by which God teaches us to estimate His own. But then we must bear in mind that they are imperfect, and He the perfect Judge; and therefore we must, to the utmost of our power, clear away what is imperfect in their sentence, though it should be in our favour, and judge ourselves according to the perfection of His, though it should be against us. If Jehoiada had been alive, it is not likely that Joash would have consented to the murder of Zechariah; it is probable that he would have rejected the counsel of the princes of Judah, when they would have persuaded him to join with them in the worship of strange gods; and yet the events that actually took place shew that there was in him a lurk-

ing unsteadiness of faith, and indifference of love and duty towards God, which perhaps Jehoiada never suspected. Therefore we must be always jealous over ourselves with a godly jealousy; and judge ourselves, if we would not be judged. We must examine ourselves, as in the presence of God, and pray to Him to shew us, in the record of our own conscience, whether we are pleasing Him or men, whether we are trusting in Him or in men. If we have done anything that we know our wise and good human friend would condemn, we may generally conclude that we are wrong. We have not an equally strong presumption of being right, if we have our human friend's approbation; for there may be secret sores in our heart, underlying the fair outside, which our friend's eye cannot reach, but which may be ready to break out to our ruin, when circumstances of temptation yet untried and unforeseen assail us.

And what security have we, or can we have, against these? None but the promise of God, that He will never fail them that seek Him. The fairest show of early life can give no more than a comfortable hope, not a certain assurance, of final perseverance. Is, then, the early show of virtue valueless? Not so; it is a gift of grace, and a pledge of grace yet to be bestowed more abundantly upon those who continue in grace. Hast thou been carefully trained in youth, and lived hitherto to the comfort of thy friends, and in earnest seeking of the glory of God? Give diligence, and pray without ceasing that thou mayest continue in the things that thou hast learned, and be found of Him without spot and blameless. Without His help, thou must still, after all that has been done for thee, be a castaway. For there is that about thee, and around thee, that will reach and stir up the motions of evil within thee to thy ruin. But hold fast by God, and

thou shalt not thus fail. For He is faithful, and will not suffer thee to be tempted above that thou art able; but will with the temptation also make a way to escape, that thou mayest be able to bear it. He will pour upon thee the gift of His Holy Spirit, whose fruit is in all goodness, and righteousness, and truth. He will guide thee with His counsel, and after that receive thee to glory.

SERMON XII.*

THE GOODNESS OF KING JOASH.

BY

DANIEL MOORE, M.A.,

**INCUMBENT OF CAMDEN CHURCH, CAMBERWELL; AND LECTURER AT
ST. MARGARET'S, LOTHBURY, LONDON.**

THE GOODNESS OF KING JOASH.

A SERMON,

PREACHED IN

THE CHURCH OF ST. EBBE,
OXFORD,

ON FRIDAY, MARCH 5, 1858.

BY

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14.

OXFORD,

AND 377, STRAND, LONDON:

JOHN HENRY AND JAMES PARKER.

M DCCC LVIII.



A SERMON,

&c.

2 KINGS xii. 2.

“And Jehoash did that which was right in the sight of the Lord all his days wherein Jehoiada the priest instructed him.”

For a right understanding of the character and reign of Joash, we should consult not only the account given in the present chapter, but that contained in the parallel chapter in the Book of Chronicles;—the narrative in the Book of Kings being somewhat fuller on matters pertaining to the early piety of the monarch, whilst that of the Chronicles details, with more minuteness, the influences which led to his declension, and the occasion of his shameful fall. The leading facts of his history you will recall easily. After the death of his father Ahaziah, at the hands of Jehu, the queen-mother Athaliah, influenced partly by revenge, and partly by her own ungovernable ambition, determined to seize upon the kingdom; and, as a means to the accomplishment of her object, proceeded to the massacre of all the seed royal. By the pious stratagem of an aunt, however, who was wife to the high-priest Jehoiada, the infant Joash escaped from the fangs of this most worthy daughter of Jezebel—being hidden for six years in one of the chambers belonging to the house of the Lord. In the seventh year, Jehoiada began to think matters were ripe for putting an end to the base usurpation

of Athaliah, and asserting the young King's right to the throne. By a bold and well-concerted scheme, he succeeded in both these objects. Athaliah was slain. Joash was proclaimed King. And having received at the hands of Jehoiada the diadem and the book of the law, the infant monarch was made to enter into a solemn covenant with the people, binding both parties to be faithful to the worship of the true God. During the minority of Joash, the affairs of the kingdom went on comparatively well. His beginnings were full of promise. And even for several years after he was of full age, the young King seemed chiefly anxious to carry out the plans and projects of Jehoiada, not only on account of the comfort he would naturally feel in leaning on a stronger arm, but in some degree, no doubt, from gratitude to one, to whom he felt he was indebted both for his life and throne; so that, as both histories inform us, *all the days of Jehoiada, Joash did that which was right in the sight of the Lord.*

But while the King was yet in his prime, his faithful adviser died. And very soon, other and far different counsels were in the ascendant. The princes of Judah, knowing that a want of self-reliance was the great infirmity of the King's character,—seeing that his strong prop was gone,—and persuaded that he was as much dependent upon that prop for his religion, as for anything else,—plied him with the audacious proposal to forsake the temple of the Lord, and to transfer his worship to the idols of the grove. *And he hearkened to them.* From this time his fall was rapid. *Evil men and seducers wax worse and worse.* Urged by his obsequious and unprincipled courtiers, he was led first to dishonourable compromises with his enemies; then to a stolid resistance to Divine warnings; and, lastly, to the unparalleled ingratitude of murdering the son of his former benefactor. His end was as ignominious as his fall had been disastrous.

Being smitten of God with grievous disease, his own servants conspired against him, as he lay upon his bed. And, at the age of forty-seven, he went down to a grave of shame,—buried as mean men are buried,—an outcast even from the sepulchres of his fathers.

Such are the leading facts of a history, on which I have been asked by your Chief Pastor to found a discourse, tending to shew THE EVIL OF A RELIGION WHICH IS BASED ONLY UPON THE INFLUENCE OF OTHERS,—which has no root in itself, but which, being unstable as water, and flexible as a reed shaken with the wind, will neither bear fruit unto holiness, nor have its end in everlasting life.

I. And first, let us advert to the habit of mind itself, against which we are to be cautioned, in order that we may detach from it, for separate consideration, so much as is due to a constitutional weakness of character,—to a natural diffidence and dread of having to go alone,—a weakness which, as not coming within the scope of our moral powers entirely to eradicate, we must believe either the mercy of God will pardon, or His grace will rectify and render harmless. We cannot doubt the existence of this as a common form of mental infirmity. It will ally itself to intellects of the highest reach, and to wills of the most indomitable and commanding power. That powerful tyrant, who, at the beginning of the present century, made more than half the nations of Europe tremble, had as little of the self-reliant element in his nature, as the lowest subaltern he ever ordered to the field. True, when he *had* resolved upon a step, neither difficulties nor dangers moved him; but to *make* him resolve upon it, he must have the consent of some trusted and approving mind,—in private life being as much influenced by his Empress, as, in public matters, he leaned on the counsels of Talleyrand.

And if this practical subjection to the will or counsel of another—this tendency to hang on and hold on by what is

felt to be a stronger judgment—be found among the higher and more daring spirits of our race, how much more should we look for it in humbler and more dependent ranks? That power which we see, in some men, of arriving at an instantaneous, confident, and yet wholly self-suggested decision, is not necessarily an indication that their judgments are stronger, or their moral sensibilities more acute, than those of other men; but may come of mere temperament,—a rude corporeal energy which compels to prompt action, and settles the mind down in its first-formed resolve. Exceptions, no doubt, there are to be found in abundance, but, as a rule, a strong character will be found allied to a robust materialism, and a hardy frame will be most favourable to moral determination and endurance.

We may not, therefore, shrink from the admission that some men are born into the world with a soft, pliant, treacherous debility of will. They must have somebody to think after, and speak after, and act after. They hold their will, as it were by feudal tenure, under other people's wills,—changing both lord and service, if need be, seven times a day. Such persons appear, at first sight, to be a good deal at the mercy of their providential lot,—in the power of those accidents and associations, which shall bring them under the permanent ascendancy of a better or of a more corrupt mind,—of a Jehoiada, who will lead them in the good and the right way, or of dissolute princes of Judah, who will be as oracles to mislead, and as guides to destroy. But we allow not that their soul's life can be suspended on any such precarious issues. We may not make a God of temperaments, nor a God of circumstances; but must believe of original tendencies of character, as of any other influence which might be hazardous to our moral steadfastness, that there is provided for us, in the economy of grace, a way of escape, an ordained antidote to our nature's evil, an agency

from above, whereby God may get honour upon our infirmities, and *out of weakness may make us strong*. At all events, the practical lesson of our admission that there are some natures cast in a more pliable and ductile mould than others, is, that in exact proportion as we discern in ourselves this constitutional frailness, should be our resolution to *cease from man*,—to yoke ourselves neither with small nor great,—to determine that we will drink truth only at the spring; and obtain light only from the source; and, rising above the changeful atmosphere of human influences, and human trusts, will avouch that *one is our Master, even Christ*.

II. But passing over the case of any constitutional liability to be influenced by other minds, let us address ourselves to the evil of the habit itself, when it allows others to think and act for us in the great concerns of personal religion. And proceeding upon the example furnished by our text, we are to take the case, where the influencing or ascendant mind is, according to our common human estimates, a strong mind, a good mind, a mind formed to lead, and honestly and earnestly bent on leading right. In many cases, no doubt, this may be a great advantage. It is a happy thing for young people, setting out in life, to be under the direction and control of one whose only desire is to lead them in the way to happiness. And yet we are to shew, that if our religion stands only in the power which this mental superior wields over us,—goes no lower down to the depths of our spiritual being than his example can reach, or his influence can minister to,—such a religion will be vain, will never become more than a surface religion, will not get itself fixed and fastened into the roots of our moral nature, and consequently that, in time of temptation, we shall fall away. The relation out of which this subordinating influence arises makes no difference in the evil of becoming enslaved to it. It may be that of a parent, exercising a control over the filial conscience,

which belongs to him by the eternal prescriptions of Heaven ; or that of the husband, drawing the wife into assimilations of thought and feeling, almost before she is aware of it,—affection yielding to the influence, and the marriage sanctities giving it the force of law ;—or that of the pastor, who, it may be, having *begotten us in Christ Jesus through the Gospel*, having been *gentle among us as a nurse cherisheth her children*, having been the channel through which have come to us the most sanctified messages that have ever reached our souls,—has drawn out all our foolish hero-worship,—himself made unto us Church, and Bible, and Creed, and all. Or, once more, it may be that of the faithful guardian, or tutor, or friend,—the Jehoiada of our infant years,—one to whom, from our earliest youth, we had been accustomed to look up, with all the docility of trust, with all the submissiveness of reverence, with all that absoluteness of self-surrender which indicates an entirely subjected, and, as it were, engrafted, mind. Yet, be the relation what it may, or the influence what it may, if our goodness have nothing firmer for its support, and nothing deeper for its root than any of these, it is but as a house built on sand, and sooner or later it must fall. You will ask me why ? I answer,—

i. First, because such a religion is essentially *false and defective in principle*. It originates neither in love to God, nor gratitude to Christ, nor deep views of the evil of sin, nor delight in holy service, nor aspirations after the sanctities and bliss of heaven—but chiefly in a desire to approve itself to some dominant and controlling influence. The man does not, with the Psalmist, *set the Lord always before him*. He is content to have constantly, before his eyes, a great mental presence. By the light of this divinity he shapes his course. That which exceeds *his* requirements is not piety ; and that which eludes *his* scrutiny is not sin. Hence a twofold evil—a low standard of practical godliness, and an undue regard to

the piety which is seen of men. The religious standard is low. Water cannot rise above its level. And as Jehoiada, whether from timidity or policy, had done nothing to remove the high-places of sacrifice, though confessedly a reproach to the authorized temple-service, Joash would do nothing either. And so the eulogium, even upon his early goodness, has to be qualified by the remark, *but the high places were not taken away*. The examples are rare, where, in the race of goodness, the disciple outstrips his chosen guide. If he does so, it is because a better guide has taken him in hand; and the master's influence has become merged in the mightier power of the Spirit of God. But, as a rule, the subject-mind will keep below the religious standards and measures of its superior. All its goodness is derived goodness, and it shines only in a borrowed light. *But they, measuring themselves by themselves, and comparing themselves among themselves, are not wise.*

And as the standard of piety is low, so the acts of it are specious, external, prompted often by a feeble sentimentalism, or perhaps with a view to the praise of men. Conspicuous among the pious notices of Joash, was his zeal in setting about the repairs of the temple, injured less by time than by the sacrilegious spoliations of the sons of Athaliah. It were easy to account for this zeal on other grounds than those of personal goodness. That temple was very dear to him. Under its hallowed and protecting shade had he spent the first years of his life,—a sanctuary from the persecutions of the foe, and a school where he was taught his first lessons of God and heaven. How natural that he should address himself vigorously to a work, so gratifying to Jehoiada, so easily mistaken by himself for the dictate of pious emotion, and so calculated to gain him credit with his subjects for a loving attachment to the truth of God. And so also it may be with us, while our religion is in others' keeping. We may love the temple, have joy in ordinances, feel a thrill of sacred

emotion under the power of the word; yea, and for the largeness of our alms, be called *the repairer of the breach, the restorer of the paths to dwell in*, while yet, of any principle of vital godliness we may be as destitute as Joash was. Rooted and grounded in the depths of the carnal heart, may be hidden the seeds of an unsuspected idolatry, which wait but the scorching sun of temptation to develope into pernicious growths,—to turn the repairer of the temple into a worshipper of the grove, and to lead a lover of faithful teaching to slay, between the temple and the altar, the servant of the living God^a.

ii. But, secondly, we say of a religion that owes its being to any merely human deferences, that it will always be *feeble and languid, and inefficient in itself*; that it will leave its possessor unprepared and unequipped for the struggle, and temptation, and rough discipline of life;—a prey to the first evil influence that should try to make a capture of him, or to be overcome by the first afflictive trial, which should send him to the foundations of his trust. So weak was the hold which the religion of Joash had upon his conscience, that it yielded to the most despicable and transparent lure that ever man's soul was taken withal; namely, the fawning sycophancy of a few unprincipled courtiers, asking, as the bold price of their servility, that he should cast off the worship of his fathers, violate the covenant of his God, and bow the knee with them before the divinities of the grove. *And the King hearkened unto them!* Yes; for why should he not? His religion had all along been the creature of influence, and therefore must change as often as the ascendant influence changed. Strength of its own such religion has none, either to resist or to bear. It is impotent as the autumn leaf;—now lifted up in circling eddies by the blast, now awaiting, in passive helplessness, the first footstep that should crush it in the earth.

^a Comp. 2 Chron. xxiv. 21 with St. Matt. xxiii. 35.

And hence I say, that in all this religion obtained at second-hand, this diluted Christianity of another mind, there will generally be found a sickly irresolution of purpose—a sort of letting out of one's moral principles to the highest or most powerful bidder. The man who trusts in it, is not his own master. He is the property of the first strong will that should deem the appendage worth having. Whatever there may be in his religion of the graceful, and the courteous, and the lovely, and the refined, we can never tell how long it will last. His goodness is the forced nursling of the hot-house, not a plant to brave the storm. There is in it nothing of the patience that can bear affliction; nothing of the fortitude that can brave danger; nothing of the magnanimity which, to maintain its uprightness, would be as unmoved by the terrors of a threat, as it would turn with scorn from the meanness of a bribe. But true religion—that which is rooted in a Divine principle, and a Divine influence—is a hardy thing, a manly thing. It is furnished for the *cloudy and dark day*, and expects its coming. Deep in the springs of its unseen life is an element of strength, which gives dignity to the character, composure to the spirit, a settledness and perseverance to the once-formed resolve, that nothing can daunt, and nothing can turn aside. Strong in itself, and in the ever-present succours of its God, it has the same answer whether to friend or foe,—“What mean ye to weep and to break mine heart? For I am ready not to be bound only, but also to die at Jerusalem, for the name of the Lord Jesus.”

iii. But the text suggests a third reason for predicting the inevitable miscarriage of a religion which is dependent for its life on surrounding influences, namely, that the very friends, who helped to make us as good as we are, *may in the Providence of God be taken away*. “Jehoash did that which was right in the sight of the Lord all his days

wherein Jehoiada the priest instructed him." But Jehoiada died; and what did he do then? Why evil, and evil only. The *morning cloud* disperseth not sooner, nor the *early dew when it passeth away*, than did that fabric of gossamer and unsubstantial goodness, which a breath was to destroy, even as a breath had made. And it seems to be in obedience to a law—as if it were a Nemesis of God on the man who leans on human trusts—that Joash became more impious and profane, for having known something of the semblance of piety before:—just as the Emperor Nero, conspicuous for humanity and virtue, while he had the counsels of Seneca to guide him, went down to the grave a monster, with the execrations of millions upon his name.

Grave lessons arise from this aspect of our subject, brethren, whether as applied to those who, consciously and of purpose have joined themselves to the train of a person of superior mind, and only to please him keep up a show of goodness,—or to those who, having a loving and leaning affiance in another's wisdom and piety, have been content to draw from him all their soul's life and strength, and, unconsciously to themselves, to let him be to them instead of God. To the former, or Joash class, the lesson is, that it had been better for them never to have known good things at all. They are fretting under a temporary yoke, only to indulge in more unrestrained and turbulent license as soon as it shall be taken away. The instant the weight is lifted off, the bent bow will fly back with more violent rebound. There may be love for a season, zeal for a season, concern for God's holy things for a season; but when Jehoiada is dead, the long pent-up energies of evil will burst forth. Like the heir long kept out of an expected inheritance, the heart plunges into the thick of its carnal joys; and, as if to take revenge on himself for his forced and early goodness, the man endeavours to crowd as much iniquity as he can into the remainder of his days.

But there is a lesson also to those who do not fret under their mental subjection—who, in their hearts, love their Jehoiada—and, indeed, whose chief danger is that they love him too much ; and who therefore think within themselves, ‘if he should be taken away, what good will our life do us? or what power shall keep us faithful to our pious troth?’ So may reason the son, who, breathing from his youth the pure atmosphere of domestic piety, has seen, in the life of his parents, all that could ennoble godliness, and all that could make virtue loved. So may reason the husband, who, sympathizing but too little, as yet, with the higher thoughts and joys of his partner, feels that it is only her life of humble piety which has kept him right, and that he should fall utterly, were he no longer *to behold her chaste conversation, coupled with fear*. So may reason the humble disciple, as he sees the teacher whom he has loved, taken from his head, leaving him, as he gazes into heaven, and thinks of the hallowed and happy memories which that whirlwind is bearing away, to exclaim, *My father, my father, the chariot of Israel and the horsemen thereof!* And yet, brethren, how confidently may we affirm, in these cases, that the separation was one of infinite mercy. How truly might we, with all reverence, put into the mouth of this dying parent, dying partner, dying friend, those sacred words, “It is expedient for you that I go away;”—‘For you have rested in the creature, not in the Creator; you have turned into gods those whom Heaven sent as guides; the Great Benefactor has been slighted and dishonoured in His own gifts; and you have been content to find relief in *THEM*, when it should have been sought at first hand from *HIM*.’ And thus many a man has learned to bless God for these removals. They forced him to think and act more for himself; to sound the depths of his own Christianity; to bring out more the self-reliant powers of his character; and so to turn a piety which

had been the sickly growth of influence, and imitation, and dependence, into a manly and vigorous product, equipped for noble service, and rooted in the strength of God.

iv. It were pertinent to urge further against a religion, having no root but in the pious influences and associations which surround us, that it *must* fall, and is of God righteously *left* to fall, because it wars with the grand design and object of all revealed religion, which is to make ready a people prepared for the Lord, to produce an entire consecration of the heart to His service, and to magnify those influences of the Holy Spirit, by which Christ is formed in the soul, and souls are made meet for heaven.

But I must conclude with one or two practical counsels, as helpful to keep us from the danger of which the history of Joash warns us.

1. And first I would say, have a care of being deceived as to your spiritual state by what may be called *the amiabilities of religion*. Cradled in the sanctuary, nursed by a pious aunt, his early years watched over by a faithful servant of God, it had been a wonder if the early outward life of Joash had not been full of grace and promise. And like family influences are at work among us now; and, to the eye of man, beautiful is the fruit they bear,—in the interchange of gospel charities, in the observance of gospel duties, and in the sweet play of all those graceful affections, which give such a dignity and charm to many a Christian home. Still we might attract, and even deserve, the largest measure of praise for our social and domestic worth, while, to anything like heart-religion, we were as utter strangers as was this unhappy King of Judah. The qualities which gain for us such praise, so far from evidencing any experience of vital godliness, may, and often do, consist with a heart unchanged, with a conscience unawakened, with a lurking enmity towards God and His service in the heart, which waits but its occasion

to break out into open rebellion, and to seat an idol of the grove upon His throne.

2. A second counsel I would offer is, see to it that there be *no halting or undecidedness in your religion*. Joash does not seem to have *joined* the princes of Judah ; but *he hearkened* to them, and from that they knew his mind. *He that wavereth is like a wave of the sea*, says St. James, *driven with the wind and tossed*. The image denotes the utter unsettledness of the divided heart—the absence of all serenity and repose—an acute sensitiveness to every disturbing influence—a never continuing in one stay. And the truth of this description some among us, it is likely, can verify. We can remember the time when the light within us was just breaking ; when we were beginning to discover that our whole previous religious life had been a mistake ; that whoever might have been our chosen types of godliness,—our parents before us, our friends around us, or the multitude everywhere,—religion meant more, included more, required more than up to that time had satisfied us. And we began some practical changes. We were less frequent at this place, and we went no more to that. A hurtful habit was abandoned, and a long-neglected duty was taken up. But there was nothing of the *Caleb* spirit in us all this time. We did not follow the Lord fully, entirely, as men who had marked out their line of life with resolved purpose of heart. The secret was not mastered by us, that religion consisted in a spiritual and internal influence upon character, leavening and controlling our whole moral being—hopes, principles, aims, tempers, affections, thoughts. And the consequence was, that, for a time, we brought forth nothing but a worthless, hesitating, two-faced godliness—being obliged, for consistency's sake, to do the bidding of Jehoiada, but, with a strong hankering desire in our hearts, to cast in our lot with *the princes of Judah*.

Lastly, as ye would have a goodness that shall stand, that shall endure, that shall abide the ordeal of that fire which is to try every man's work, of what sort it is, see that ye have an inward *experience of the vital realities of religion*—the regenerate will, the renewed mind, the revival of that spiritual image upon the conscience, *which, after God, is created in righteousness and true holiness*. You cannot be too severe or searching, in ascertaining your personal participation of these essentials of the spiritual character. The work of God the Holy Ghost upon the heart is no vision of enthusiasts; no mere dogma of schools; no accident or modal variety of the religious temperament,—but it is a life, an inspiration, a mighty change wrought upon the converted soul, having God for its author, sanctification for its fruit, and a happy immortality for its end. And as it is a real work, so is it also a necessary, an indispensable work. No man can be saved without it. Zeal, or the show of it, may set us upon repairing temples; the counsels of a faithful adviser may *make us for a season do that which is right in the sight of the Lord*; but nothing can alter that qualification for the heavenly fellowships, nothing exempt us from the operation of that unchanging rule of God,—*If any man have not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of His*. AMEN.

SERMON XIII.

THE GOODNESS OF KING JOASH.

BY

HENRY DRURY, M.A.,

**VICAR OF BEEHILL; PREBENDARY OF SARUM; CHAPLAIN TO THE LORD
BISHOP OF SALISBURY, AND TO THE HOUSE OF COMMONS.**

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THE GOODNESS OF KING JOASH.

A SERMON,

PREACHED IN

THE CHURCH OF ST. GILES,
OXFORD,

FRIDAY, MARCH 5, 1858.

BY

HENRY DRURY, M.A.,

VICAR OF BREMHILL; PREBENDARY OF SARUM; CHAPLAIN TO THE LORD
BISHOP OF SALISBURY, AND TO THE HOUSE OF COMMONS.

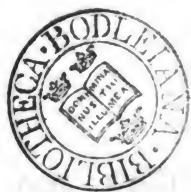
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OXFORD,

AND 377, STRAND, LONDON:

JOHN HENRY AND JAMES PARKER.

M DCCC LVIII.



A SERMON,

&c.

2 CHRON. xxiv. 20.

“Ye cannot prosper: because ye have forsaken the Lord, He hath also forsaken you.”

THE chronicle of Joash, king of Judah, conveys a remarkable lesson, and preaches to us besides a very humbling doctrine. It is therefore a theme well adapted for this solemn season of humiliation. In behalf of those who may not be familiar with it, I shall first take leave to sketch the Scriptural record, and then, by God's blessing, I will endeavour to draw the appropriate instruction from it.

Joash was quite an infant, when “that wicked woman,” as she is expressly designated,—“that wicked woman,” Athaliah, his father's mother, to gratify her vaulting ambition, rose and slaughtered in cold blood all the seed royal of the house of Judah. In that massacre she had no doubt thought to include this child also, but Jehoshabeath, his aunt, wife of Jehoiada the high-priest, stole him from among the slain, and hid him away with his nurse for six years in a bed-chamber in the house of God. At the end of that term the tyranny of the wretched usurper had so utterly alienated the loyalty of her people, that Jehoiada seized the occasion to organize a

conspiracy in favour of the rightful heir to the throne. He took into covenant with him some trusty captains of hundreds, men of authority in the army; he gathered the chief fathers of Israel; he compassed the royal child around with priests and armed Levites; he set all the people with weapons in their hands to line both sides of the temple, and to secure every avenue to the altar; and then he brought out the son of Ahaziah, and circled his forehead with the crown, and gave him the testimony, or copy of the Law, and made him king. And as he anointed him with holy oil, he lifted up his voice with his sons, and cried aloud, "God save the king!" And when Athaliah heard the shout of joy, and the noise of the people, she forced her way into the temple, and, behold—the boy, whom she had left in the heap for dead, stood at his pillar, and the princes were gathered round him, and the trumpets blew their loudest blast, and the singers poured forth their most jubilant song, and again they cried, "God save the king!" and Athaliah answered with a scream,—"treason! treason!"—and she fled to the outer gate, and there they slew her with the sword.

Thus enthroned, thus crowned, thus solemnly consecrated to the service of his country and his God, King Joash was still in his infancy; and during the long minority that ensued, Jehoiada was constituted his guardian, and appointed regent of the kingdom. It was scarcely possible for a youth to be subjected to a better tutor, or trained under better auspices. The regent was manifestly a man of consummate ability, of rare courage, of inflexible honesty, and, as became a ministering servant of the Most High God, of sound and devoted piety. His first act was to make a covenant between himself and all the people, that they should be "the Lord's people." Then they went in a body into the house of Baal, and brake it down—brake all his altars and images, slew Mattan the

priest, and hurled idolatry from the land. This done, he again exacted of the whole nation an oath of fidelity to Joash; and so we read, "the people of the land rejoiced, and the city was quiet." There was a faithful ruler over the house, and peace in all their borders.

In this healthy atmosphere was Joash nerved and qualified for the high vocation to which he was called. He was blessed with a sound religious education, and initiated into all the mysteries of political science; and it is the first notice we have of him, when invested with full power, that he was minded to repair the house of the Lord;—not his *own* house, you observe—not the royal palace; there is not a word about cedar, or vermilion, or gold to repair the king's courts; but the house of the King of kings—*that* was all his thought by day, and all his dream by night,—that there should not be a crack or a flaw in the walls of that magnificent temple; that all things there should be done after the fashion of his ancestors, and according to the pattern shewn in the Mount; that with all the splendour wealth could purchase, and all the circumstance that art could devise, the sanctuary of his God should be embellished, and the worship of his God celebrated.

And how did he propose to effect that purpose? By levying a tax, a rate upon the inhabitants of the country; by sending into all the cities of Judah, and gathering money of all Israel "from year to year;" by doing that which our fathers also have done for centuries in their love of the Redeemer, and for the maintenance of His more simple ritual,—which, alas! a confederacy of their sons, from whatever motives, are now seeking to undo—by imposing a national rate to support the national faith, and by asserting it as a normal condition of an established Church, that the land which Heaven blesses with fruits of increase, enriches with all material wealth, and lavishly supplies with every luxury

that can minister to social enjoyment—that such a land, and the people of such a land, should yield back, and gratefully acknowledge their obligation to yield back, a portion however small of that substance, and lay it upon the altar not grudgingly nor of necessity, but as a free-will offering to their God.

Now we stay not to dwell upon this pleasant picture of a young ruler thus “beginning in the Spirit;”—there is another side, a reverse of it, “an ending in the flesh,” to which we must hasten to call your attention.

Jehoiada waxed old and died. At one hundred and thirty years of age he gathered up his feet upon his bed, and gave up the ghost. We may well imagine the distress and anguish of heart with which the stripling monarch bent over that dying man: “My father! my father!”—a father? aye, and more than a father to him! We can see him now prostrating himself, like Joseph upon the livid corpse of Jacob, weeping over that cold clay, and kissing it, as though he could reanimate it with the tender warmth of his embrace; and we can almost hear the solemn pledge and the earnest prayer with which, standing in the presence of his dead, he bound himself, by all the sweet memory of the past, to walk in the ways of that holy priest, to observe all his counsels, to practise all his precepts; and, when the angels should bear him to a loftier throne and a crown of purer gold, to carry with him a strict account of his sacred trust, and to lay it before Jehoiada on the bosom of Father Abraham.

Well, what followed? In ten years from that time Joash was so utterly another man, that you cannot recognise in him one feature of that godly disposition we have been delineating—not one; not a vestige, not a suspicion remains of the goodness of Joash. His degenerate heart was now a cage of unclean birds; his degraded court a nest of unprincipled

nobles, fulsome parasites, and sensual infidels. The temple, robbed and pillaged to bribe away an invading enemy, was left to the moles and bats. Baal again reigned paramount in his filthy groves. In vain God sent His prophets to bring these backsliders to some sense of shame—they gave no ear to the message. At last He put His Spirit upon Zechariah, the son of Jehoiada, as though He would say, “Surely he will reverence the son of his great benefactor!” But Joash murdered Zechariah,—he ordered him to be stoned with stones. There was no feeling of pity, no compunction of conscience: as the Scripture with its quiet simplicity records it, “he remembered not the kindness which Jehoiada had done to him, but slew his son.” The sequel is soon told. Vengeance was on the track of the assassin. At the end of that year the Syrians had swept into their own place all those miscreant princes, and had carried away their spoil; and Joash, left to chew the cud of his apostasy, tossing to and fro upon a bed of sickness, agonized with disease, stung with remorse, deserted by his miserable friends, betrayed by his own servants, saw the flashing steel of the conspirators brandished over his head—felt it plunging fatally into his bosom—and with one cry of terror, one groan of pain, rendered up his unhappy soul to the tormentors.

This is a sad illustration truly of the deceitfulness of the human heart; of the weakness of the natural man; and of the perishing nature of that impulsive goodness, which rests solely for its permanence upon the constraining influence of others. There are, (thanks be to God for His unspeakable gift!)—there are spiritual agencies now at work, to which the generation of Joash was a stranger, and we may hope that so gross and so violent a declension from early righteousness is comparatively rare: but we dare not deny that the son of Ahaziah still represents a very large class of persons

subsisting even in the Church of Christ,—persons of warm and susceptible feelings, acting habitually under impulse, of a temper of mind volatile, or pliable, or keenly sensitive, upon which impressions are easily made, and as easily effaced. You can call up instances of many such amongst your own acquaintance, perhaps of your own households. I doubt not there are some such in this congregation; some, perhaps, brought hither to-night by an accidental attraction of the moment, the instigation of some friend, or the visitation of some Providence—some voice that has whispered to them, “Son, go work to-day in my vineyard,” and to which they have answered readily, “I go, Sir,” but of whom it will be found in the end, that all their compliance evaporated in the virtuous concession, and that in truth and reality they “went not.”

And indeed, if I may venture to say so in the face of this audience, in spite of all the inspiration of this place, all the venerable associations of this queen of academical cities—in spite of the world-wide fame she has achieved—in spite of the vast army, which no man can number, of master-minds here drilled and disciplined, and furnished unto every good work, yet we could point to no spot more suggestive than this of the evanescent quality of that light of the soul which is simply reflected, of that transient goodness which walks by sight and not by faith. Here, in the very most critical period of life, whilst the judgment is raw and inexperienced, when strong passions are arming themselves for the mastery, and reason is most easily thrown from its balance—here are gathered together, from all parts of the land, a multitude of young men suddenly emancipated from the careful supervision of home and the rigorous shackles of school—transferred to a new stage of probation—and however amenable to the restrictions of their College, and the salutary laws of their University,

yet virtually left to mould for themselves, out of the plastic material of the inner man, the form and fashion of the moral character in which they would play their part in time, and stand before their God in eternity. Oh! if the stones could cry out of these walls, and the beam out of the timber could answer them; if your fabled river-god could deliver his prophetic soul, as in the poet's dream of old,—what a fearful revelation, what a harrowing tale might they unfold of the hopes that have here been disappointed, the promises cast to the wind, the bright prospects marred, the prayers made of none effect! How could they startle and scandalize these busy and contemplative scenes with a recital of the fine talents here frittered away, the splendid parts given to waste, the vigorous intellects dissipated! What a plaintive dirge might they weave out of the expectations that have here been blasted, and the hearts thereby broken, and the grey hairs brought with sorrow to the grave! How could they people your halls and your cloisters, your gardens and your glades, these now teeming haunts of youth and health and strength and gladness, with a generation of gaunt phantoms of men untimely old, men of worn visage and shattered nerves, who long long ago buried all their good intentions beneath this sacred soil; men who had never prospered in life, who had here matriculated, here perhaps graduated, but who *could* not prosper, because they had here also forsaken the Lord. Here, however, they had been sent in the fullest assurance of confidence, to these schools of the prophets, to be nurtured in holiness, enlarged in understanding, matured in scholarship, stored with knowledge, confirmed in the courtesies of a gentleman, elevated in the conversation of a Christian: sent here to improve their natural faculties by study, and by intercourse with great and gifted and chivalrous minds; to trim their spirits for the encounters of life, to prepare their souls for

temptation, and so to ratify the covenant which they had made with their guardians below, with their God above, that they would be of the number of the Lord's people. And here they gathered, a sprightly troop, filled with noble emulation, strong in their own resolutions, earnest in their purpose to gird up their loins to the task, and to fulfil the purpose of their coming.

Well, what followed? First, the whisper of the arch-tempter, more subtle than any beast of the field—"What! hath God said thou shalt not eat of every tree? Why, man, you are free! This is not home; this is not school: here at least you are free; eat, drink, and be merry!" Then the busy fellow-helpers of that Evil One. The sceptic, intolerant of a creed, asking contemptuously, What is truth? The controversial humourist, coining his ingenious sophistries, and commending them with his insidious drollery. The listless idler, always intruding his unwelcome presence upon the conventional hours of study. The voluptuary, who lived for the cup and the carousal, putting his bottle to his companions, and filling them with shame for glory. The sinner in the city, whose house is in the way to hell, going down to the chambers of death. The tradesman, enticing his customer to reckless extravagance with the offer of unlimited credit. The sordid money-lender, weaving his web of usury, simulating pity for his victim, and calculating his reversions to the uttermost farthing. These, and such as these, have "made their obeisance," like the princes of Judah; and, behold, Jehoiada is gone, and Joash has hearkened to them! Now he has left the God of his fathers; now he serves groves and idols; now he treads daily the downward path,—and he cannot prosper, because God has forsaken him.

You will say then, if the case be so, it is better to have no counsellors, no guides, no Jehoiadas—to employ the mini-

mum of controlling direction for the young. Make your child self-dependent, self-reliant: commit him boldly to his own instincts, the intuition of his moral sense.

Not so, my brethren. The whole course of God's dealing with His creatures urges upon us a different lesson. It is not good for us to be alone. The relations of man with man, and especially of the elders with the younger, are so close and complicated, that you cannot spin theories out of them, or force experiments upon them. There they are, and by no philosophy can you make them other than they are. From the cradle we throw out tendrils, and grope about for aid, feeling for something to which we may cling, higher and stronger than ourselves. God has created us with these instruments of attachment, with passionate yearnings and affections,—the necessary properties of a beating heart,—with a craving desire for the sympathy and support of those with whom our lot in life is cast.

To preach the disturbance of such ties, and the substitution of the spirit of absolute self-reliance, what were it, but to preach licentiousness—to pamper the pride and self-sufficiency of man's unsanctified will—to upheave old foundations—to destroy the peace of families—to dislocate the framework of society—to cancel the charter of the Church?

Therefore, in some sense and to some extent, the goodness of one being *must* rest upon the goodness of another. This is an imperative law. The question is not whether we shall admit it, but how we shall administer it? How shall the parent train his child, and the tutor admonish his pupil, and the priest so inform his people, that they may be humble and dutiful, and yet "have root in themselves," not "during for awhile," not offended when temptation or tribulation cometh for the Word's sake, but having root in themselves—striking their roots downwards, as their branches strive upwards—multiplying the fibres thereof, and anchoring them to

the soil from which they draw their life, until they come in themselves to the full stature of perfect men, strong as the cedars of Lebanon, as trees which the Lord has planted?

Now so long as the will of man is free, and the infection of sin remaineth, even in the regenerate, it were idle to talk of any infallible specific :—

“ Death only binds us fast
To the bright shore of love :”

but our mother-Church, ever wise, ever anxious, ever true, has warned us of the one Scriptural remedy that comparatively bears the test. She refers us to the first principles of the doctrine of Christ. Tell them, she says, of their responsibility. Deal with them as accountable moral agents—as those who, in virtue of their baptism, *are* become “temples of the living God ;” not mere possible recipients of spiritual influences in contingency, but the actual depositories of sacramental grace in possession—elect vessels, into which the Spirit has already poured Himself, through the manifestation of the life of Jesus ; members, therefore, of Christ, children of God, and inheritors of the kingdom of heaven. Let there be no refining upon this written law of evangelical verity. Teach them this, and you strip them at once of the excuse, which has passed into a proverb, that “old Adam is too strong for young Melancthon.” Or contrariwise, hide it from them, and what then?—Why, comforting themselves with the blind assurance that they are not sinning against grace—that their sin therefore is not deadly—they will run, may be, into every excess of riot ; they will perhaps bargain with their Maker, as St. Augustine did, urging the enticement of their lust, and praying that their conversion may be delayed a little longer, presuming upon the mercies of God with the temerity of that penitent father, and lacking his humility to confess it.

Oh, if I am to send my son to fight the good fight of faith, to wrestle against the powers and principalities of darkness, and to stand against the wiles of the devil, above all things let me stablish him with this fact, as a counterpoise and antidote to the delusions of the world—that he is *now* a responsible being ; let me brace and gladden his soul with the contemplation of the sterling dignity of his new birth—of his translation into the kingdom of God's dear Son—and of his completeness in Him, which is the Head of all power. Let me warn him that he is neither stranger nor foreigner in the commonwealth of Israel, but a fellow-citizen with the saints, and of the household of God, having already come unto Mount Sion—being already a member of the general assembly of the Church of the first-born—already made a partaker, by the blood of sprinkling, in that new covenant of which Jesus is the blessed Mediator.

With all these gifts in possession, all this futurity in store, cast your eye, my Child, across the nether valley, and fix it far away upon the gleaming scarp of yonder everlasting hills, and pray God that you may keep that good thing that is committed to you—that you may never be tempted for any morsel of meat profanely to sell your blessed birthright—that you may have a heart that will not quail, and a faith that cannot be moved, to serve your Lord day by day reverently, acceptably, and with godly fear.

I believe that if I thus deal honestly with my Charge, I may not only make him thoughtful and manly and conscientious and true, but I shall give him a Hope that is palpable and tangible, in entire accordance with the will and word of God, in harmony with the central truth of Christianity, and in obedience to all the teaching and traditions of the universal Church of Christ.

I believe that, in so training him in the way that he should

go, I am providing for him the best security, that when he is old he shall not depart from it. He will prosper, because he hath not forsaken the Lord. And when in the world's view, and according to the world's language, I am "dead and gone,"—say rather, when I am passed away from this lower scene, this ante-chamber of the new Jerusalem, into the upper building, not made with hands—then, I believe, though we be absent in body—father and son, Jehoiada and Joash—we shall still be present in spirit; we shall yet hold a real, though unseen, communion; together in some still solitude we shall mingle our tears and prayers, our adoration and praise; together we shall ponder the great mystery of godliness; together we shall dwell upon the blissful certainty of our future meeting in glory—"looking for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come."

SERMON XIV.

THE CONVICTIONS OF PILATE.

BY

W. W. CHAMPNEYS, M.A.,

CANON OF ST. PAUL'S, AND RECTOR OF ST. MARY'S, WHITECHAPEL.

THE CONVICTIONS OF PILATE.

A SERMON,

PREACHED IN

THE CHURCH OF ST. MARY-THE-VIRGIN,
OXFORD,

ON WEDNESDAY, MARCH 10, 1858.

BY

W. W. CHAMPNEYS, M.A.,

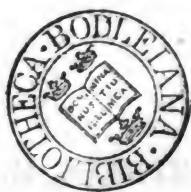
CANON OF ST. PAUL'S, AND RECTOR OF ST. MARY'S, WHITECHAPEL.

16.

OXFORD,

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JOHN HENRY AND JAMES PARKER.

M DCCC LVIII.



A SERMON,

&c.

ST. MARK XV. 15.

“And so Pilate, willing to content the people, released Barabbas unto them, and delivered Jesus, when he had scourged Him, to be crucified.”

WE do not wonder when we see the waiting-room of some great physician crowded with patients: we expect to see disease clustering round the healer. We do not wonder when we see the streets of the city and the fields of the country changed into hospitals, with their rows of sick waiting for the Christ to touch and heal. This was natural, for it was the sick crowding round the Physician.

We do not wonder that sin should hate goodness. *We* know what the old philosopher did not, that Virtue, when it came on earth, was not worshipped and adored. Incarnate Goodness had to “endure the contradiction of sinners” during His sojourn upon this earth. And this, again, was natural. Christ and Belial have no concord.

Should we wonder, then, that the last scene of the Saviour’s life should be crowded with characters exhibiting the most marked and striking varieties of that sin which hated Christ, and hunted Him to death. This, again, was natural. It agrees with the nature of sin and goodness. He who came to destroy sin, and to save us from sin, was surrounded in the last hours of His life of sorrow by those forms of moral disease, of inward depravity, of which the bodily sicknesses and infirmities which had surrounded His footsteps during His whole life, were but the outward and visible

signs, — “the shadows, but not the very image of the things.”

The study of the Redeemer's last hours is, consequently, the study of *man* as well as of man's *Redeemer*. And no other proof would be required to shew that *man needs* a Saviour, and how deeply lost he is without one, than that proof which the careful study of Christ's last hours will furnish.

On *one* of the characters in this scene of human wickedness and Heavenly Goodness we desire to concentrate our thoughts now. That character is THE JUDGE who gave up the Christ to the death of a Roman slave; and whose name, imbedded in the Christian Creed, will never be forgotten till the hour when this earth shall disappear in the consuming fire, these heavens pass away with a mighty noise, and Pilate, the judge, shall stand before the Saviour whom he crucified.

As it is from the *facts* recorded in the Gospels that we shall get at the *character* of Pilate, we will,

First, CONSIDER THE FACTS, as we gather and arrange them from the four Gospels.

We have not, then, to sketch the character of the dark betrayer, who had kept so good a face that none of his fellows even *suspected* him; but whose true character Jesus had read from the first, and *proved* that He had read it. “Have not I chosen you twelve, and one of you is a devil?”

We have not to gather the character of the warm-hearted but hasty Peter, with his ardent spirit and *natural* courage, as contrasted with the calm, steady, higher, because *moral* courage, of the loving and gentle John.

We have not to remark how nearness to God in His service and His worship, if it is not joined with *love* to God and His holiness, makes men often the persecutors of that goodness which they of all men should love the best, and opposers of that truth which they of all the world should both welcome and protect. Nor is it our present object to shew how, when, as in the case of the Jewish priests, ceremonial exactness is substituted for inward purity, the men whose place, power, station in society, and class-influence depend entirely on

the *one*, should hate the man who clearly shews that the *other* is the only thing of weight in the sight of Him with whom *we* have to do. Leaving these, we take up the history at that point where Pilate comes upon the scene.

The Sanhedrim had already met : the Prisoner had been brought in. They had tried to find witnesses to put Him to death. After much difficulty, two had been found. But, when examined, their evidence did not hang together. They did not report what Jesus had actually said, but what they either supposed Him to have *meant*, or, at least, said they supposed. He had said, "Destroy this temple, (*you* destroy it,) and *I* will build it again in three days." They reported that He had said, "*I* will destroy the Temple of God." Therefore they were *false* witnesses. And when *we* do not repeat the very words of another, but words which have a different meaning, we are false witnesses. On this the high-priest, in violation of the principles of all justice, forced the Saviour to condemn Himself. He put Him on His oath. "I adjure Thee by the living God, that Thou tell us whether Thou be the Christ, the Son of God." Jesus, deferring to the authority of the chief magistrate of His nation, distinctly avowed that He is "the Christ." For this He was found guilty of blasphemy by all the Sanhedrim, except Joseph of Arimathæa and Nicodemus, who protested against the sentence, and was declared guilty of death.

But as the power of life and death had been taken away from the Jews by their Roman conquerors, and it was no longer "lawful for them to put any man to death," it was necessary that they should get the Roman governor to condemn Him. They knew, however, that he would treat as a matter of indifference that crime which they had declared worthy of death. They must, therefore, change their ground ; they must suit their accusation to the court and to the judge. Having arranged their plans, they proceed in a body to the Governor's house. It was early in the morning. They remained in the street, for the house was the house of a heathen, and they were "of the holy seed,"—it would have defiled them to go in *there*,—and they were going back as soon as they had effected their purpose, "to eat the Pass-

over." Hypocrites, fools, and blind! which defiles a man the most—malicious hatred that is not satisfied but by the blood of the innocent, or contact with the pavement and atmosphere of a heathen dwelling? What close friends are superstition and cruelty! How well suited is the "silver dross and the potsherd;" the worthless glitter of hypocritical profession, and the poor vile earthen vessel that it covers from the sight!

The crowd is gathered at Pilate's door. He is told who they are, and why they are come.

As a Roman, he knew what justice meant. He knew what the duty of a judge is; that it is to see if the accused have broken law: if he has, to punish; if he has not, to discharge the prisoner. Here, then, duty was clearly plain. It was to examine, and then decide on the evidence.

But it is all over with duty when men begin to say, "What will the *people* think of this? how will this please *men*?" And Pilate had so acted before this as to make him *fear* what the people he governed might think on this occasion. He had entered on his government with that feeling of contemptuous superiority, which leads the governing to trample not only on the prejudices, but to insult even the honest religious convictions of the governed: whereas the wise and good will ever respect what is honest, even though mistaken, and will never insult even where they cannot support. He had ordered the Roman standards on which the image of Cæsar was hung, to be brought into the holy city. This was contrary to the laws of the Jews, whose sufferings in Babylon in seventy years had thoroughly cured them of idolatry. He had allowed them to be brought in *at night*, and planted without the knowledge of the inhabitants. He had laid a trap to destroy the Jews, who flocked to Cæsarea to remonstrate; and placing his seat in the circus where he could most conveniently net the people, he ordered his soldiers to cut the throat of every Jew who did not go away home. And it was only when he saw those very Jews throw themselves on the ground and stretch out their necks to receive the fatal stroke, and prove by this noble act of self-devotion that their religion was dearer to them than their lives, that he

ordered the images to be taken down and carried back to Cæsarea.

He had resolved to build an aqueduct to bring water into Jerusalem, and ordered that the money for this should be paid out of the Temple treasury. And when the people were assembled to protest, and some "lewd fellows of the baser sort" personally insulted him, he had the folly and the rashness to disguise a large body of his soldiers as countrymen, and disperse them, armed with clubs, among the crowd, and when the same men who had insulted him before, repeated the affront, Pilate gave the signal, and all, without distinction, were attacked; many Jews were killed, great numbers wounded, and the whole body violently dispersed.

These and other acts had made the Jewish nation not favourably disposed to Pilate. And when men who have to act as judges, go *beyond* the law and justice in *some* matters, they make it harder to *keep* the law and justice in others that may follow; when men in power have given those who are under them grounds for justly blaming them already, they are almost in the hands of those who are under them. The people and the ruler change places, and the real governor is he who has the decision virtually in his hands.

Pilate probably cared as little as ever for the Jews. His feelings of proud, contemptuous superiority had not changed: but his previous acts had given them matter for accusation, and he must be careful not to add fresh matter now. He must not give them a good, or even specious, ground for complaining to Rome. Now, then, he was to be put on his trial. While Jesus *seemed* the prisoner, Pilate *was*. While Pilate appeared to be judging Him, Pilate himself was really at the bar, for time and for eternity.

He comes to the door of his house: "What accusation do you bring against this Man?" They answered, that "If He had not been a malefactor, they would not have brought Him." This was no answer to Pilate's question. It was the shuffling of men who knew in themselves that they were not seeking *justice*, and a fair *trial*, but *seeking to obtain a conviction* against One they *wished* to have put to death. Pilate had his reply: "He is a malefactor, you say; then take Him

and judge Him *yourselves*." "But He deserves death by our law, and we have no power to put the law in force against Him. It is not lawful for *us* to put any man to death." Jesus had foretold this when He had said by what death He should die;—not by "stoning," as He would if the *Jews* had executed Him, but "by being lifted up from the earth" upon the Cross, according to the Roman way of executing atrocious criminals. It would, however, be of no use to tell Pilate, a Roman and heathen, about "blasphemy." He would have dismissed the charge at once: he would have driven them from the place, as Gallio did in after-time. So now the charge is "treason,"—treason against the Roman government: and this charge made against One who, when some clever specious emissaries of His enemies tried to throw Him off His guard by flattering words, and words commending Him for His fearless honesty and disregard of mere human opinion, as He held up to their view the silver coin of the tribute, with Cæsar's image stamped upon it, and Cæsar's name and titles written round it, had told them "to render unto Cæsar the things that are Cæsar's, and unto God the things that are God's." And now these very men, who hated Cæsar, and Pilate, and the Roman yoke; who were always ready to break it off; who would have hailed as the best friend they had any one who would have headed them in doing it, have the base effrontery to bring that falsely as a charge against Jesus, which might have been brought, with entire truth, against any of themselves, if their hearts had been read. Still it was a charge admirably suited to their purpose. They knew their man: they understood Pilate, and the game they were playing.

Jesus was taken into the judgment-hall: Pilate proceeded to examine Him. "Art Thou the King of the Jews?" His accusers had said that He had "given out that He was Christ, a King."

Jesus replied by another question: "Dost thou say this of *thyself*, or did others tell it thee of Me?"

"Am I a Jew?" said the Governor, (and we can well fancy the pride of Roman superiority, and the contempt of Jewish bigotry, which swelled within him as he spoke the words:)—"Your own countrymen have brought you to me as a

criminal, what have you done? Art Thou a King?" "You say right," said the Saviour, "I am a King, but My kingdom is not of *this world*. If it had been, My subjects would have fought that I should not be delivered to the Jews; but My kingdom is not of this world." "Are you then a King?" asked Pilate. "I am. To this end I was born, and for this came I into the world, to bear witness to the truth." "What is truth?" asked the Governor: but he had heard and seen enough. There stood the gentle Saviour, bound, a prisoner: that meek eye, that lowly face, were not the face and eye of a political pretender; of the bold, daring, forward leader of a revolutionary movement. *Innocence* was stamped on brow, and eye, and face, and form; and His *words*, too, clearly refuted all thought of any earthly kingdom, or any effort, or even wish, to raise a power hostile to imperial Rome. Pilate had seen and heard enough to shew him that his Prisoner was innocent of the charge, and so, without waiting for a reply to his question, "What is truth?" he went out and told the crowd outside that he found no fault in Him. Thus far conscience had done her duty: so far Pilate was right.

But the crowd of accusers were not satisfied with *this*. They did not come there to know from Pilate, as a judge, whether Jesus was innocent or not, nor even to know whether Pilate *thought* so. Their object was to get Pilate to sentence Jesus to death. This was their one purpose; and they knew their man. They knew the advantage he had given them in his previous conduct, and they pressed him with fresh charges and assurances that Jesus had stirred up all the country, and taught treason even to Galilee.

Pilate was satisfied that Jesus was an innocent Man. His clear, plain duty, then, as a judge, was to dismiss the charge, and release the Prisoner. But, unhappily, he did not *dare* to take the straightforward course. He well knew that he had already given the Jews matter for accusation against him. If he gave them fresh offence *now*, and on a charge which might afford a handle for their accusing him of want of loyalty to the Emperor, he might lose his place, and become a degraded or banished man. At that moment Pilate's future was trembling in the scale. When he took the *next* step, he

placed himself on the edge of a slippery and downward path, which brought him, at first slowly, afterwards more rapidly, notwithstanding his efforts to look backward and upward, to the depth of guilt into which he fell.

"Galilee,"—the word caught his ear. "Galilee,—that is Herod's country; it is under *his* jurisdiction. The case, then, does not belong to me, I will send Him to Herod; he is fortunately, (a Roman might say fortunately, a Christian cannot,)—he is fortunately in Jerusalem now: we have been at enmity; he will take it as a compliment, at all events, that I send on *his* subject to him to try, and do not interfere with, but respect, his authority."

And thus Pilate tried to *shift off* the responsibility, which was his own, on another; and instead of doing his own duty, and dismissing Jesus, passes *Him* on as a prisoner to Herod, though he knew Him in his heart to be an innocent Man.

But *this* device did not succeed: Jesus was soon returned on Pilate's hands. He came back clothed in an old cast-off white dress, such as the Jewish kings wore, in mockery of His supposed claim to be King of the Jews.

There stands the Prisoner once more before the judge. "Clean hands" would have saved Pilate; but Pilate's hands were *not* clean. *He* knew it, and the Jews knew it, and they made *him* feel that they knew it, and meant to use it.

"Perhaps," thought Pilate, "if I punish this Man, and they *see* it, it will be enough,—they will be satisfied." *Punishment, indeed! what right has a judge to punish an innocent man at all?* If He is guilty,—if the charge is made out, then *that* punishment, whatever it be, which the law assigns, must be inflicted; but if the Man be *not guilty*, any punishment is gross injustice, and every stroke of the scourge is a brand of infamy on the judge. Pilate has now stepped on the smooth, slippery incline; he has taken the first step downward.

The chastising did *not* satisfy the accusers; they came to have His *life*, and nothing short of this would satisfy *them*. Pilate had tried a compromise. Duty allows no compromise. He had tried to get them to accept the Prisoner's chastisement for the Prisoner's death.

Now he will try again. He bethinks him of the custom of releasing a prisoner at the Passover. There is now in prison a notable one, a rioter and a murderer. Surely *this* will do. The Jews will not choose *him*, but Jesus, to be released to them. 'No, no. The Man is an innocent Man, Pilate; you know that. Is it just to *count Him* condemned, and then release, as a condemned criminal, one in whom you find no fault? Release Him.' So spake conscience still. But the cry came up, "Not this Man (we will not have *Him* released), but Barabbas. You give us our choice, and we have *made it*." "What, then, shall I do with Jesus?" "Crucify Him." Loud and louder grew the cry, as the crowd swelled and increased. Priests, forgetting their rank and station, grey-headed and grey-bearded men, mixed themselves among the crowd, telling them what to cry, and exciting them to cry aloud. The loud cries, the furious faces, the uplifted hands, all shewed that things were near to riot, if not to insurrection.

Perhaps they *will* be satisfied with the *scourging* before death; perhaps the rods of the Roman executioners will be enough, without the cross. He shall be scourged, and they shall see Him. It may be enough! Worse and worse. Each step away from clear duty is a fresh instalment of the great and crowning crime. *They* know it who hold the governor in their power: *they* see in what he has already yielded the assurance of what they will make him yield.

The Saviour is scourged. O my soul! it was for *thy* sins. "He was wounded for thy transgressions, He was bruised for thy iniquities. The chastisement of thy peace was on Him, and with His stripes thou art healed."

There He stands: the scourge has done its cruel work; that torn, and cut, and bleeding Body surely tells its tale. But does it SATISFY His *accusers*? Look at Him. Is He not an object for pity? His head pierced with the sharp spines of the crown of mockery; the big drops of blood trickling from among His hair, coursing down His temples; and the old scarlet robe of the Roman Governor thrown in derision over His wealed and bleeding body; while His hands meekly hold a staff, thrust into them in derision of His kingly sceptre.

Once more Pilate speaks. "I have brought Him forth to tell you that I find no fault in Him." He is not guilty.

And yet, Roman judge, *you* have ordered the innocent Man to be thus cruelly mangled, because you had not the courage to do right—because you were afraid of those malicious men, whom even *you* could see to be moved by simple envy to hunt this guiltless One to death.

Will this that you have done *satisfy them*? The cry only comes up the louder, "Crucify Him." They felt that victory was in their hands. He had begun to yield: they had but to push their efforts a little further, and they would win.

"He made Himself the Son of God: He ought to die by our law."

Once more Pilate questions his prisoner. "Whence art Thou?" No reply. "Speakest Thou not unto me? Knowest Thou not that I have power to crucify Thee, and have power to release Thee?"—"Thou couldest have no power at all against Me," was the meek and wise reply, "except it were given thee from above: therefore he that delivered Me unto thee hath the greater sin."

The effect of these words was but to make Pilate more anxious to release Jesus, because more convinced of His entire innocence. Words, manner, look, tone, all told of innocence. But again the cry came up—craftily, cleverly, aptly timed, skilfully chosen,—“If thou let this Man go, thou art not Cæsar’s friend: whosoever maketh himself a king speaketh against Cæsar.” And, “We have no king but Cæsar.” It sounded in the ears of his selfish soul as if they had said—You well know that we have matter of accusation against you already: this will crown it all; this will fill it up. Refuse to condemn this Man, and we will lay all before your imperial master: we will accuse you of disloyalty to him—we will prove that conquered foreigners are more loyal than a native Roman; and your place, your power, your rank, shall all be lost. Therefore, “Crucify Him.” And they prevailed.

Again declaring his conviction of the Saviour’s innocence,

by solemnly (and yet it was but a solemn mockery) washing his hands before the multitude, and by the words, "I am guiltless of the blood of this just Person: see ye to it;" this Roman, with his clear intellect, his strong judgment, and a conscience which to the last gave a true verdict in favour of innocence and truth—this judge, "set to see that those that were in need and necessity had right," gave up an innocent Man to a dreadful and disgraceful death—not to satisfy malicious hatred, for he saw through that—not to gratify persons whom he respected or regarded, for he despised the men whom he gratified—but because he had done wrong before, and feared that if he did right now, his past wrong and his present right might both be wrung into a means of taking away his rank, and place, and power. And because he *would* not give up these, he did give up the Christ to death.

Such are the *principal facts*, as we gather them from the Gospels.

Is Pilate's character one seldom met? Nay, it is a common one; his class is a large one. He stands *alone*, indeed, in the Creed; he stands *alone* in the history of the Redeemer's last hours; but there will be many Pilates at that day when he shall stand before the Saviour—when the head that was pierced with thorns shall be blazing with rays of glory, and the Body which Pilate gave up to the rod, and the scourge, and the cross, shall be brighter a million times than the sun.

Pilate clearly, and to the end, saw what was his duty. Judgment was not clouded, nor was conscience silenced. He did not do the wrong because he thought the wrong right: but he thought he could not do his duty without losing what he did not like to lose. He had power, rank, place, wealth, influence: these he loved; these he did not like to part with. And as he *thought* that he should certainly lose these if he did what he saw to be right, and did not do what he knew to be wrong, he did the wrong rather than endanger the loss of these.

Every man who is kept back from duty because he thinks he shall lose by it, is Pilate; because he makes a choice be-

tween *duty* and supposed *interest*: and whoever decides for his supposed interest, and against duty, acts like Pilate; and if he be a Christian in name, he crucifies the Son of God afresh. Pilate's was a simple struggle between conscience and sin; and sin conquered. Wherever sin conquers conscience, so far it is Pilate again.

In Pilate's case, the particular influence that prevented was **THE FEAR OF MAN**. "What will the Jews say, what will the Jews do, if I discharge this Prisoner whom they wish me to condemn?" When once men are governed in their conduct, not by the sense of right, but by the desire to obtain the world's approval, or the fear of incurring the world's hatred, they are at the mercy of the winds and waves, without chart or rudder. They are not rocks against which the waters break, but which stand unmoved because they are rooted into the solid earth, but they are things that drift upon the surface, borne hither and thither as the current sets or the breezes drive them. The man who *owns* Christ only when the world tolerates it, or as far as the world bears it, will *deny* Christ when the world frowns. It is *impossible* to be a lover of Christ and a lover of the world; it is *impossible* to fear God and man too; it is absolutely impossible to please men and be the servant of Christ. "How can ye believe, who receive honour one of another, and seek not the honour that cometh of God only?" Once let the fear of man rule, and farewell duty—farewell integrity—farewell a good conscience—farewell God and Saviour.

If we would take Christ's side, we *must* make up our minds to sacrifices. The world never loved Him, and the world never will. "They have seen and hated both Me and My FATHER." And "the friendship of the world is enmity with God." Once let it become a *question* with us, Shall I do this which I clearly see is *right*, or shall I keep from doing it, or do the opposite, because the **WORLD** will frown, or sneer, or persecute, if I do the right? the very question shews us to be standing on the edge of danger. We are in Pilate's case, and his course *may* be ours. The quiet look towards Christ for inward strength—the stern and prompt refusal to enter-

tain the wrong suggestion—the shaking of our hand from touching the bribe—the stopping the ear from hearing the evil—the closing the eye from looking after vanity—the clinging close to conscience, will alone save us from Pilate's course and Pilate's end.

The world, though it will never cease to dislike those who wholly follow Christ, will not ply those with the frown, the sneer, the pointed finger, or the threatened loss, on whom it sees that these things make no impression; while those who, like Pilate, have yielded a little, in the vain hope of staving off further temptations, will find themselves plied thicker and faster, because by their yielding that little they have shewn the real direction of their desires, and “given place” to the tempter. They have suffered the enemy to effect a lodgement in the outer line of their defences, and from that line the fortress will be captured.

But Pilate's sad history teaches another lesson,—that they who seek to save character, or place, or rank, or to gain them by truckling to the world, often lose what they seek to keep or gain. He did *not* secure himself by surrendering the innocent Saviour. The men that hunted Christ to death became Pilate's accusers; and stripped of all that he had loved, degraded, banished, his accusing conscience within him worse than the fabled furies; stung with remorse, he flung himself, as it is said, from a rock into the deep below; and “Pilate's leap” seems to tell us still that “evil shall hunt the man” who knowingly and wilfully makes shipwreck of conscience. Did those Jews who so cleverly, so perseveringly, so effectually forced Pilate to commit his great judicial murder, not despise him in their hearts for becoming their tool, and yielding to their wishes? Did they become his friends because he had acted as Christ's enemy? Neither will the world do anything but despise those whom its smiles or its frowns either drive or draw into evil. It will make use of the tool for its own purposes, and fling it away when those purposes are answered.

Let us then seek grace to be faithful; let us ask the **STRONG** for strength, the **WISE** for wisdom; let us pray for the light

of His Holy Spirit to shew us clearly what duty is—to give us power to do it; to enable us “to keep a conscience void of offence towards God and man;” to strengthen us to resist the beginnings of evil; to enable us to look at the world in the light of approaching judgment; to be indifferent alike to its frowns and to its smiles, that we at the last day may stand at the right hand of Jesus the JUDGE, not with Pilate, the Criminal and the Prisoner.

SERMON XV.

THE CONVICTIONS OF AGRIPPA.

BY

ROBERT, LORD BISHOP OF RIPON.

THE CONVICTIONS OF AGRIPPA.

A SERMON,

PREACHED IN

THE CHURCH OF ST. EBBE,
OXFORD,

ON WEDNESDAY, MARCH 17, 1858.

BY

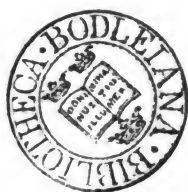
ROBERT, LORD BISHOP OF RIPON.

OXFORD,

AND 377, STRAND, LONDON:

JOHN HENRY AND JAMES PARKER.

M DCCC LVIII.



A SERMON,

&c.

ACTS xxvi. 28.

“Then Agrippa said unto Paul, Almost thou persuadest me to be a Christian.”

It will not be needful for me to remind you at any length of the circumstances under which these words were at first spoken. Paul the Apostle was at this time a prisoner, having been accused by the Jews of disaffection, sedition, and heresy. A conspiracy had been secretly formed to assassinate the man whose zeal in the cause of Christianity had provoked the enmity of the disbelieving Jews. Tidings of that conspiracy having come to the chief captain of the Roman army in Jerusalem, measures were taken to secure the safety of Paul. He was sent away by night under an escort of soldiers to Cæsarea, the city where Felix the Roman Governor then resided. He was thus placed under the protection of the Romans, and, so far, he was safe from the fury of his enemies amongst the Jews. After awhile the elders and high-priest of the Jews were invited to come down and lay their accusation against the Apostle. They did so, but were unable to support the charge which they made. Yet Paul was detained a prisoner, and for the space of two years he continued in captivity, apparently without prospect of release. During this period the opportunity was frequently afforded to him of preaching before Felix; but although under the power of his reasoning the Governor was made to tremble, it does not appear that Felix was ever brought to

a true repentance. At the end of two years the office of Governor was resigned by Felix into the hands of Festus, before whom the high-priest and the elders of the Jews presently renewed their appeal against Paul. Festus determined, before pronouncing judgment, to wait for the arrival of Agrippa, a son of Herod Agrippa, who was still permitted by the Romans to assume the title, "King of the Jews."

When Agrippa was come to Cæsarea, the next day was appointed for the trial of the Apostle. The accusation having been laid against him, Paul was invited to speak in his own defence. The chapter in which the words of the text occur contains that defence. It is the answer of the Apostle to the charge brought against him, of being "a pestilent fellow, seditious, and a ringleader of the sect of the Nazarenes." It was delivered before Festus, the Roman Governor, Agrippa, king of the Jews, and a concourse of both Jews and Gentiles. The defence is a masterpiece of calm and dignified oratory. Paul the prisoner stood confronted with the accusers, who thirsted for his blood—before the Roman Governor and the Jewish King. He reviewed the history of his past life,—how he had been brought up a Jew, and had lived after the strictest sect of the Jews' religion, a Pharisee; he appealed to the Jews who stood by, whether, as touching the ceremonial law, he had not been blameless. He put the charge which had been preferred against him upon its own proper merits. The accusation really involved the question, whether the hope and the promise made of God to the fathers had been, or not, fulfilled in Jesus of Nazareth. It was not a charge affecting only the Apostle; the real point at issue was this: could it be disproved that Jesus was the Christ? Was the Apostle in error in asserting that the crucified Jesus had risen from the dead, and was truly the anointed of God? He next related the marvellous history of his own conversion—of the way in which, from having been one of its bitter opponents, he had become the staunch defender of Christianity. He declared the terms of the commission which he had received from the Lord Jesus Himself. He then proceeded to unfold the substance of the message

which as an apostle he was sent to proclaim, and he enforced the truth of that message by an appeal to the authority of Moses and the prophets.

Very different were the effects produced by Paul's address upon the two men who sat in judgment upon him. The heathen Festus, utterly unable to comprehend the force of Paul's reasoning, supposed him to be mad:—"Thou art beside thyself," he exclaimed; "much learning doth make thee mad." Agrippa, on the other hand, was struck and convinced by the conclusiveness of the address. And as the Apostle went forward in his delivery, and laid bare the several steps by which he had been wonderfully led from the position of a virulent persecutor to that of an intrepid champion of Christianity; as he exposed the several links in that chain of reasoning which at length riveted him firmly to the conviction that Jesus is the Messiah; and as he finally appealed to the king himself on the ground of his own knowledge and belief of the prophets, and from thence drew the inference, that one who believed the prophets could scarce fail of believing in Jesus,—the speech of the Apostle told with such power on the mind and conscience of the listening judge, that at length he could restrain no longer the pent-up feeling, and he openly exclaimed, "Almost thou persuadest me to be a Christian."

It was a fine vantage-ground to which the Apostle had now fought his way. There is no reason to suppose that Agrippa was previously inclined to listen favourably to the arguments of the accused. Doubtless he regarded him with much the same feeling as the rest of the disbelieving Jews; if anything, this feeling would be one of stronger than ordinary aversion, because of the opposition between the doctrine which Paul preached and the vicious life to which we know that Agrippa was addicted. It was therefore a signal triumph which the Apostle gained, when, after advancing from point to point in the argument for Christianity, and in vindication of his conduct as one of its heralds, this very King Agrippa himself interrupted the current of the prisoner's defence—not to contradict, or silence, or rebuke him, but, by an irresistible

impulse, to do homage to the force and conclusiveness of his appeal, by the open avowal, "Almost thou persuadest me to be a Christian."

But here the history ends; the assembly presently broke up. The two judges, conferring between themselves, agreed that Paul had done nothing worthy of death or of bonds, but we read of no further result as regards the half-persuaded Agrippa. It seems probable that he died as he had lived, an unbelieving Jew; whose unbelief, however, assumed a more guilty complexion by reason of this very fact, that he had been once so far wrought upon as to own himself "almost," though, alas! not altogether, "persuaded to be a Christian."

Now, in its moral aspect, this narrative of King Agrippa is highly instructive; the more so, because the character which it portrays is often found, even amongst professing disciples of Christ. You observe, it is the narrative of one in whom conscience was awakened; whose views of divine truth were partially rectified, whose judgment was to a certain extent convinced; who stood upon the very margin of Christianity, with a deep impression of its truth and reality, with a half-formed resolution to resign himself to its profession, but who, nevertheless, halted on the brink, and never ventured on the decisive step to which for the moment he felt inwardly impelled. In all these features of the case we find nothing uncommon, nothing but what is realised from day to day amongst ourselves, in the professing Church of Christ. There are numbers of persons who advance just so far as Agrippa advanced, but no further. They have their strong convictions; they are almost persuaded. It would seem there is but a step further for them to take in order to become Christians in deed and in truth; yet here they pause—the half-formed purpose does not ripen into action; the consent *almost* given is withdrawn; the door of the heart, which was opening at the Saviour's call, is again closed against His admission, and they remain what Agrippa was, "*almost*" persuaded, and yet practically very far from being altogether Christians. I shall take occasion, then, from this narrative, in humble dependence upon the help of God's Holy Spirit, to enlarge upon the character

of the almost Christian, with the view, (1.) of pointing out the features, and (2.) exposing the peril of the case which answers to that of Agrippa, when he exclaimed, "Almost thou persuadest me to be a Christian."

I. Now there is need to be reminded of the broad distinction which exists between the external profession of Christianity, and that thorough submission to the revealed will of God which is the essence of real discipleship to Christ.

It is possible to go great lengths in religious profession, and yet to know little or nothing of the power of vital godliness. It is easy to confound an external profession with a real change of heart,—a living union with the Saviour. More especially is this a snare of the present times, when toleration in religious opinions is so largely exercised, when the manifestation of religious zeal and fervour provokes but little opposition or rebuke, and when it would almost seem as though the offence of the Cross had in great measure ceased. Hence it is the more needful to point out the difference between nominal and vital Christianity—between the semblance of discipleship to the Saviour, and that entire consecration of heart and service which is the blessed fruit of faith working by love.

The distinction between the almost and the altogether Christian is similar in kind with that which exists between the mere professor and the true believer. Hence, in describing how far a person may go in religious profession without being a Christian in heart, as well as in name, I shall be virtually describing the case of the *almost* Christian, as contrasted with that of the altogether Christian.

I observe, then, that the almost Christian may have a very just regard for the outward duties of Christianity. He may be convinced of the truth of the several doctrines which compose the scheme of the Gospel. He may acquiesce in the Scriptural statements as to the depravity of human nature, the moral corruption and feebleness which have resulted from the first man's disobedience. It may be he will not go the length of admitting that man is *as far gone as possible* from original righteousness; yet he will admit that the nature is depraved, that a moral virus has

tainted the whole of man's being, which of itself deserves God's wrath and condemnation. He will admit the doctrine, that salvation is a result for which we are indebted wholly to Christ; he cannot deny that a stupendous arrangement has been made for the recovery of our fallen nature—an arrangement which involved the incarnation and obedience unto death of the Eternal Word. The slightest claim to the character of a Christian requires the admission, that man's salvation has been procured by Christ; and therefore it may be assumed that even the almost Christian will admit that we are saved through none else; that it is for His sake alone we can be freed from condemnation, and re-admitted to the favour of God.

Not, indeed, that in his case the view entertained, whether of the death of the Mediator, or of the benefits which flow out of that sacrifice to every believer, will be of the same depth or clearness as in the case of one who is spiritually enlightened: still the fact stands out so prominently in Scripture, that no man can gainsay it—salvation is the gift of God, conferred for the sake of Christ.

The almost Christian will readily agree in the representation of that moral rectitude which God requires in those who will finally enter heaven. It will not jar with any feeling in his breast to assert that the Christian is required to be honest, truthful, sober, just, and temperate, unselfish and benevolent;—for all these excellencies of character he may have a cordial respect; and readily acknowledge how agreeable it is with the moral attributes of God, to demand the exercise of such tempers and dispositions in those upon whom the Divine favour is to be bestowed in this world, and everlasting glory in the next.

And to this I must add, the almost Christian may have a lively taste for devotion; he may even find pleasure in holy exercises; he may regard a religious profession, as exhibited in the practice of social and public worship, both seemly and profitable, yea, and justly due from one who is looking for the approval of Him who sitteth on high: and thus the return of every morning and evening shall witness in his dwelling the gathering of his household to join in family worship,

and each recurring opportunity shall find him in his wonted place in the sanctuary, joining with fervour in the solemnities of public devotion, or listening with eager attention to the exposition of the lively oracles, or even frequenting the Table of the Lord to partake of the consecrated memorials of the Body and Blood of Christ.

Now it is a painful, but not upon that account a less certain truth, that in the foregoing sketch nothing is delineated but what may be realized in one who is nothing more than an almost Christian. I well know the kind of mental recoil with which some persons shrink from the statement, that so much of religious profession may co-exist with a heart unchanged, a nature unrenewed and un-sanctified, and therefore not meet for the presence of a holy God. How shall we bring this truth home to the conscience? how shall we make you perceive and own its reality? There is one practical test which might, I think, serve to make it evident. I will throw out of account, for the present, other considerations. I will not pause to remind you what a common thing it is to own the doctrine of human depravity, without ever having been brought, under an overpowering sense of personal sin, and consequent danger, to ask, What must I do to be saved? I will not stay to point out how common a thing it is to yield a ready assent to the statement that salvation is of God in Christ, and yet to be practically leaning all the while upon some hope which is equally unscriptural and delusive; nor will I linger to exhibit how all those various excellencies of conduct, integrity, benevolence, amiability, a fair religious profession, may adorn the character of an unrenewed man, of one who virtually rejects the Redeemer's propitiation and righteousness as the only plea for pardon or acceptance with God. But let me ask, as a matter upon which each man's conscience is able to give an answer to the question,—May there not be all that I have described, without any real abiding principle in the heart of love to God? with no affinity to the temper of the Psalmist, who exclaimed, "Whom have I in heaven, but Thee: and there is none upon earth that I desire in comparison of Thee?" with no congeniality of feeling to

the Apostle who declared, "The love of Christ constraineth us, because we thus judge, that if one died for all, then were all dead; and that He died for all, that they who live should not henceforth live unto themselves, but unto Him that died for them and rose again." May there not be all I have described, while nevertheless there is the most thorough worldliness practically exhibited in the every-day walk and conversation? The world is that for which you mainly live: eternity is made secondary to time: earth's cares, earth's pleasures, earthly pursuits, earthly objects, earth's gains,—these are what most engage your thoughts, your studies, your ambition. Not, indeed, that you are without a religious profession. Nay, you have a religion—and a religion, too, which you value highly, and practise diligently; but it is not a religion which unites the soul with God,—raising its aspirations to high and holy things, fixing its affections on things above, weaning its professor from the love of this present world; giving a tone of spirituality to all his thoughts, and words, and actions; and by the influence which it casts on the whole of his conduct, making it evident to others, as well as himself, that he has been in deed and truth "born of God," and made a new creature in Christ Jesus. Try yourselves by the ordinary test of thought and conversation: what is it upon which your desires are principally fixed? Is it not, with too many, upon objects which centre and terminate in the present state of being? Can you say with sincerity that you have ever given your heart supremely to the Saviour? that you have ever made a decided separation from the world, and with fixed purpose and resolve determined to count everything but loss, so that you may but win Christ, and be found in Him; not having your own righteousness, but that which is through the faith of Christ, the righteousness which is of God by faith? Indeed, till you can say this, I can but warn you that, whatever your profession of Christianity may be, whatever your conformity to those precepts which relate to the outward conduct, whatever the virtues which adorn your character, and make you an object of admiration amongst men, you are nothing better than the "almost Christian." True Christianity captivates the whole being, and subjugates

to the Saviour the entire current of thought, speech, and action. It leavens the whole man; it gives a new direction and a new impulse to all his desires, aims, and affections: and oh, if there be such a thing as "setting the affections on things above, and not on things on the earth;" if there be such a thing as living above the world, whilst yet living in it, as an abiding in fellowship with the Father, and with the Son, by the Spirit; if there be a "joy unspeakable and full of glory," the possession of those who believe in Christ Jesus,—then is it not too evident, that where there is little or no deadness to the world, little or no spirituality of aim and conversation, little or no real fellowship with the Father and with His Son Jesus, no constant upturning of the thoughts to the Saviour, no poising of the affections on Him as the centre and stay of the soul's life and enjoyment; whatever may be the attainments in knowledge, or the manifestations of zeal, or the participation of outward privileges, there is no claim to be regarded as in reality anything better than the only half-persuaded—the only "almost Christian."

Before passing on to the second part of my subject, I will allude—in further illustration of the truth which I have been aiming to establish—to what is of frequent occurrence under the ministry of the Gospel. I have the fullest confidence in the truth of the inspired statement, that God's Word shall not return to Him void. That is a statement, in virtue of which I believe that wheresoever the Word of God is faithfully preached, effects will certainly follow. It will be for a savour of life to some, or of death to others. Thus it comes to pass, that whensoever an ordained ambassador for Christ delivers himself of the message of divine truth, he will by the manifestation of that truth commend himself to the consciences of those to whom he speaks. The message may be disliked, by some, ridiculed by others, disbelieved by others. Nevertheless, the message is not in vain; the incorruptible seed cannot be altogether lost. It will fall into some hearts—it may be into many—so as to abide and bring forth fruit.

Thus I believe that whilst a faithful sermon is being delivered, there is frequently produced a degree of inward

disturbance and emotion, whereof the preacher may be quite unconscious. As he rebukes indifference, ungodliness, or vice; as he denounces unbelief, or self-righteousness, or covetousness, or worldly-mindedness; as he insists on the absolute necessity of conversion of heart, if a man would be saved,—there is an effect produced which, even though it should prove evanescent, is yet enough to make good the belief, that the energy of God's own Spirit does always accompany the faithful proclamation of God's own Word. Nor is it any over-bold conjecture, that, as the issue of many and many a moral conflict like this, could the agitated hearer openly express the state of feeling to which he has been brought, he would use the very same words which King Agrippa uttered to Paul,—“Almost thou persuadest me to be a Christian.” Are there none of you, my brethren, whom I am addressing at this moment, whose experience agrees with this representation? With all your profession of Christianity, baptized though you have been with Christian baptism, and nurtured amid holy ordinances, and familiarised with the facts, and the doctrines, and the precepts, and the warnings of revelation, yet conscience tells you, you are not a Christian indeed. You have never fled to Christ as the sinner's only refuge and only hope. You have never thoroughly felt your need of His atoning blood to cleanse—of His righteousness to justify—of His Spirit to sanctify and save you. You have never yet heartily closed with the Gospel offer, and resolved to abandon all for Christ's sake; and yet you have often been brought very near to this. Under the preaching of the Gospel, it may be, as some faithful exposure has been made of the guilt of remaining in an unconverted state; or as some vivid setting forth of divine truth has arrested for awhile your attention; or as you have been reminded, “If any man have not the spirit of Christ, he is none of His,”—and “whosoever he be of you that forsaketh not all that he hath, he cannot be My disciple;” or as the preacher has dilated upon the grace and the all-sufficiency of Christ—His ability and readiness to save to the uttermost all that come unto God by Him; and as you have been plied by the glories of heaven or the terrors of hell to come at once to this Saviour who has promised, “Him that

cometh to Me I will in nowise cast out,"—I ask you if it has not often been the case, that the message has penetrated the innermost recesses of your spirit, and you have felt so wrought upon by the power of the truth which was being proclaimed in your hearing, as fully to answer to Agrippa's state of mind, when he could not refrain the utterance, "Almost thou persuadest me to be a Christian." Yes, here is a moral condition which closely corresponds with that of Agrippa at the period to which the text refers. It is that state when the citadel of the heart appears all but won for Christ, and yet, as experience too frequently and too painfully evidences, the hope is delusive; the emotion dies away; the former moral indifference reasserts its dominion, and there is no abiding fruit from all that fair appearance which, for the moment, gave promise of so blessed a result.

II. And now it only remains for me briefly to point out wherein the special danger consists of resting in the state of "an almost Christian."

I observe, then, to begin with, it is not the almost Christian who will ever enter heaven.

Take what definition you will of an almost Christian, he wants the only title that will avail for admission to heaven. He is not of the number of those who have freely and unreservedly surrendered themselves to Christ. He is not depending exclusively upon the atoning blood and sanctifying righteousness of Christ. He is not daily growing in grace, as the effect of the indwelling in the heart of the Holy Spirit, and hence, while there may be much that is exemplary in his walk and conversation, and nothing to challenge the reproach of his fellow-men, yet forasmuch as he is destitute of the Saviour's righteousness, the only raiment in which any man can stand with acceptance before God, he would be utterly out of his element in heaven, even were it possible for him to be transplanted thither. Heaven is not his prime object of pursuit, and wherefore should he complain if he does not reach it. Religion is embraced, but only so far as its profession will conduce to the attainment of some present and temporary advantage. Such a religion may answer the end for which it is assumed, but it will not do

more than this. It may secure a standing in the Church on earth; it will not secure a place amongst the Church of the first-born, whose names are written in heaven.

But I go further yet than this: there is less hope, ordinarily speaking, of the conversion of an almost Christian, than of one who has been hitherto utterly careless and unconcerned. In our blessed Lord's parable of the two sons, you will remember it was the son who almost obeyed at the first bidding, who actually said, "I go, sir," and yet afterwards he went not; but the one who gave a flat refusal, afterwards repented and went. Now I dare not attempt to compare the relative degrees of grace which may be required to accomplish in different cases the conversion of a sinner to God. Conversion is in every case a miracle of Omnipotent power. But in regard of ordinary experience, it may be safely affirmed that the grace of God is less frequently seen to take effect upon those who may be pronounced almost Christians, than upon those in whom there has never taken place any religious awakening at all. A formal, self-righteous profession of Christianity presents a more difficult barrier for the Gospel to surmount than a state of utter indifference, or even of avowed opposition. And in like manner, when religious emotions have been once kindled, when the feelings have been powerfully wrought upon, and yet not developed into consistent practice, the probability is against their being kindled afresh, or kindled to any good effect: upon this two-fold account, then, the case of the almost Christian is one of extreme peril. He has religion enough to satisfy the conscience, but not enough to save the soul. At the same time, the very fact that to some extent religious impressions have been kindled, renders it the less likely that any abiding impression will be hereafter produced. Agrippa was *almost* persuaded to be a Christian; but he perished an unbeliever.

For your own soul's sake, then, I call upon you for resolution on the Lord's side. Religion is too solemn a matter to be trifled with. If worth anything, it is worth everything. It is either entitled to our first regard, or not to our regard at all. It is of infinitely more moment to you and to me to know what is our real state before God, and what will be our por-

tion in eternity, than to gain the loftiest distinctions which this world has to offer. Religion is not a vain thing ; it is for your life. Neutrality in other matters may be lawful, nay, desirable : neutrality in religion is moral suicide. It was neutrality in their religious profession which procured from the Redeemer against the Laodiceans that severest of all maledictions—" So, then, because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spue thee out of My mouth." Be decided, then, for Christ ; give to God what He claims—the whole heart ; tarry no longer amongst those who are the "almost Christians," but no more. Come in faith to the Saviour. Seek in earnest prayer for the application to your heart and conscience of that precious blood which cleanseth from all sin ; ask for a share in that righteousness which is freely given of God to every believer ; and while you aim at being "accepted in the Beloved," let the sincerity of your faith be evidenced by those fruits of righteousness which are, by Jesus Christ, to the praise and the glory of God.

The possession of the Saviour's character ; His meekness, His condescension, His gentleness, His zeal, His separation from the world, His compassion for the souls of men—this is the evidence of a justifying faith ; this is the mark of one who is on the march to the heavenly Zion ; this is the sign of one who is more than the almost—yea, who is the altogether Christian.

SERMON XVI.

THE CHANGE OF SAUL INTO ST. PAUL.

BY

HENRY LINTON, M.A.,

RECTOR OF ST. PETER-LE-BAILEY, OXFORD.

THE CHANGE OF SAUL INTO ST. PAUL.

A SERMON,

PREACHED IN

THE CHURCH OF ST. EBBE,

OXFORD,

ON FRIDAY, MARCH 19, 1858.

BY

HENRY LINTON, M.A.,

RECTOR OF ST. PETER-LE-BAILEY, OXFORD.

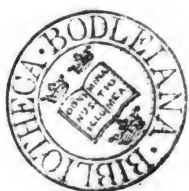
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OXFORD,

AND 377, STRAND, LONDON:

JOHN HENRY AND JAMES PARKER.

M DCCC LVIII.



A SERMON,

&c.

Acts ix. 11.

“Behold, he prayeth!”

PRAYER is the breath of the new creature—one of the first signs of spiritual life.

But why does our Lord use the term “*Behold?*” Was there anything unusual or remarkable in Saul of Tarsus praying? Did he not belong to the Pharisees, the straitest sect amongst the Jews,—who said their prayers with the greatest regularity? True. But it is one thing, my brethren, to *say our prayers*, and another to *pray*. For prayer, to be accepted by God, must arise from a sense of need, a conviction of sin, and an earnest desire and hope of mercy. And according to this rule, *Saul had never prayed before!* But now it was no longer an unmeaning form, but the sorrowful sighing of a contrite heart and the sacrifice of a broken spirit. There was joy in heaven at that sight. And as the glad tidings spread among the spirits of the just made perfect, the holy Stephen saw an answer to his dying prayer “Lord, lay not this sin to their charge*.” No wonder, then, that the Lord of angels, who beheld in Saul’s conversion the travail of his own soul and was satisfied, announced it to the faithful Ananias, and through him to the Church at Damascus, in the short but expressive sentence, “Behold, he prayeth!” And when Ananias hesitated to go and lay his hands on one of whom he had heard nothing but evil, the Lord Jesus assured him that this late enemy to the Cross of Christ was a chosen vessel unto Him, to bear his name before the Gentiles, and kings, and the children of Israel.

But what was the previous history of this remarkable man,

* Acts vii. 60.

and what were the steps by which Saul the Pharisee became Paul the Apostle? It is a deeply interesting inquiry. O may God shine upon us with the bright beams of his grace, while I endeavour, in entire dependence on his Holy Spirit, to set before you the Scriptural account of this wonderful transaction.

Now in tracing the previous history of Saul, we must be careful neither to paint his character in darker colours than Holy Scripture warrants, nor yet to conceal its deformity. He was a young man of great promise, descended from pious parents^b, who, being devoted Jews, had him educated by their most celebrated teacher, Gamaliel, and taught according to the perfect manner of the law of the fathers^c. Being possessed of good talents, and endued with great earnestness and industry, he profited by his advantages, and carried his zeal for the traditions of his fathers beyond his fellows^d. He was never addicted to vice: so far from it, that "touching the righteousness which was in the law he was blameless." He had strictly observed both the ceremonial and the moral law, and could fearlessly appeal to all who knew him, that he had "lived in all good conscience before God from his youth up^e."

Such was the bright part of his character. But it had also a dark side. It is true that he was full of zeal for God, but that zeal was not directed by knowledge. It was blind and misguided. Saul was proud, opinionated, headstrong, impetuous, and impatient of contradiction. Brought up in an exclusive school, he was a narrow-minded bigot. Without examination, he took it for granted that the tenets in which he had been educated must be right, and everything opposed to them wrong; and being of a naturally eager and overbearing disposition, and formed to lead opinion rather than to follow it, he was bent upon distinguishing himself in the persecution which was then arising against the despised sect of the Nazarenes—deluded followers, as he supposed, of one Jesus of Nazareth, who had been recently crucified for pretending to be the Messiah, but who, as they had the hardihood to maintain, was risen again from the dead and taken up into heaven.

Full of these false ideas, he was delighted with the murder

^b 2 Tim. i. 3.

^c Acts xxii. 3.

^d Gal. i. 13, 14.

^e Acts xxiii. 1.

of Stephen^f, and kept the raiment of those who slew him. Like a wild beast which has tasted human blood, he made havock of the Church; and "Benjamin shall ravin as a wolf^g" was the character of the individual no less than of his tribe. At the commencement of the chapter from whence our text is taken, we find him "yet breathing out threatenings and slaughter against the disciples of the Lord," or, as he himself expresses it, "exceedingly mad against them^h," insomuch that he "persecuted them even unto strange cities,"—in particular, unto Damascus. But here he was to be arrested in his course.

It is an old remark, that "man *proposes*, but God *disposes*;" and Solomon reminds us that "there are many devices in a man's heart; nevertheless, the counsel of the Lord, that shall standⁱ." If any one had told Saul, as he left Jerusalem bent on his purpose to root out the hated name of Christ, that ere the sun went down he would be earnestly praying to God to number him amongst that very sect whom he then most hated and despised, he would have laughed him to scorn. But God is almighty, and most merciful. "He bringeth the blind by a way that they knew not, and leadeth them in paths that they have not known^j." He is a Sovereign, and giveth not an account of any of his matters. By his counsel, secret to us, He had separated this very Saul of Tarsus from his mother's womb to be an illustrious monument of his mercy, and an apostle to the nations. And in pursuance of that plan, He now revealed his Son in him, and called him by his grace^k. Where we cannot fathom God's counsels, let us adore them, and magnify the riches of his grace.

Now as Saul came near Damascus, "suddenly there shined round about him a light from heaven, a great light, above the brightness of the sun, and he fell to the earth, and heard a voice saying unto him, Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou Me^l?" O how soon can the Lord fling his enemies to the ground! What mortal man must not be blinded by the rays of that light which surrounds Jehovah Jesus! It was of the Lord's mercies that Saul was not consumed, and that the

^f Σαῦλος δε ἦν συνευδοκῶν τῇ ἀναίρεσει αὐτοῦ, Acts viii. 1. Compare Matt. iii. 17. ^g Gen. xlix. 27. ^h Acts xxvi. 11. ⁱ Prov. xix. 21.

^j Isa. xlii. 16. ^k See Gal. i. 15, 16. ^l Acts ix. 3, 4; xxii. 6; xxvi. 13.

same light which struck him to the earth did not sink him into hell.

But there was likewise a voice, which, though heard by all, came with articulate sound to him alone, "Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou Me?" His name was doubled, either to arrest his attention, as when God cried, "Abraham, Abraham;" or rather in tender concern, as when Jesus said, "Martha, Martha," and "Simon, Simon." It was not, I think, the voice of upbraiding, but of warning. "Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou Me?" Every word is emphatic. *Why?* What evil have I done? Is it because I came down from heaven to die for thee, that thou art in arms against Me? *Why persecutest?* Little did Saul think himself a persecutor! No persecutor of the saints acknowledges the odious title; but, whatever conscience may whisper, calls himself a servant of God, and a righteous avenger. But Jesus said, "*Why persecutest thou?*" *Thou* too, a Jew, and a man of education, capable of making enquiry, and ascertaining truth! But thou hast allowed thyself to be so blinded by pride and prejudice, that thou canst not see the fulfilment of thine own Scriptures in my life and death, resurrection and ascension, and the outpouring of my Spirit. "Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou Me?" Knowest thou not that my people are dear to Me as the apple of mine eye? Those many saints of mine whom thou didst shut up in prison; those martyrs of mine against whom thou didst record thy vote; those faithful servants of mine whom thou didst so often punish in every synagogue, and urge them to blaspheme^m; the strokes thou didst inflict on them fell on Me, the iron entered into my soul. Unhappy man! what hast thou done?

"And Saul said, Who art Thou, Lord? And the Lord said, I am Jesus, whom thou persecutest: it is hard for thee to kick against the pricks." What must have been Saul's feelings when the truth flashed upon him, that the same Jesus whom he had been persecuting in his members, whose claims he had derided, and whose Name he had blasphemed, was indeed Messiah the Prince, the Seed of Abraham, the Lord of Glory! He had been fighting against Christ, and lifting up his heel against the Holy One of Israel. And thinkest

^m Acts xxvi. 10, 11.

thou this, O man, that rebellest against God, and despisest the riches of his forbearance and long suffering and the strivings of his Spirit, and ridiculest the hopes of the godly, and hatest those who bear Christ's image, and deemest them enthusiasts and fools, thinkest thou that thy sensations will be less keen in the day of Christ's appearing? When thou seest Him on his great white throne, clothed with majesty and honour, in the glory of his Father and the holy angels, surrounded by his redeemed saints, with their snowy robes and glorious palms and radiant faces; and when the greatness of thy guilt for the first time fastens upon thee, and the veil of pride and prejudice and self-love is withdrawn; when all that thou hast lost, but mightest have won, passes in swift review before thee,—the greatness of the glory, the vastness of the riches, the eternity of the reward; when the great King of heaven and earth, the Fountain of honour, the Lord of life, turns to those whom thou hast scorned, saying, "Enter ye into the joy of your Lord: Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world;" but looks on you with one unmistakeable look of displeasure, and enquires why you have despised all his counsel, and would none of his reproof; why you have scorned his love, refused his mercy, hated Him and his people? surely in that day you will be able to enter into the feelings of Saul when he heard the voice of the Eternal Son of God saying, "I am Jesus, whom thou persecutest." Only there will be this difference, that while Saul was yet in the land of the living, and within reach of mercy, thy day of grace will be passed, and this will be the beginning of eternal despair and misery. But it has not yet come to this. As yet the door of mercy is open; as yet the voice of the Redeemer cries, "Why wilt thou die? Him that cometh unto Me I will in no wise cast out." Wherefore, turn and live. O happy soul who obeyest the Divine call, (for it is not the voice of the poor worm who addresses you, but the voice of the Master, speaking in his minister, who calls you from sin to holiness, from death to life,) it may be that thou art reserved for great things, and that "where sin hath abounded, grace shall much more abound."

So it was with Saul. "He, trembling and astonished, said,

Lord, what wilt thou have me to doⁿ?" Here, as I believe, was the turning-point of his life. It was no gradual change, but instantaneous. It was conviction,—it was conversion. Grace, like an overwhelming tide, carried all before it. He was no longer like the horse and mule, which have no understanding, kicking against the goad, but the willing servant in the day of the Redeemer's power, to be henceforth guided by the Master's eye. It was no longer, What will the high-priest have me to do? what will man have me do? From this hour he had done with pleasing men^o. Christ was his Master, and Him only would he serve^p.

And now that his proud heart was humbled, and his stubborn will changed, it pleased the Lord to magnify the riches of his grace by at once revealing to him his high mission. Such is his own account of the matter to Agrippa, as recorded in the twenty-sixth chapter. "Rise, and stand upon thy feet: for I have appeared unto thee for this purpose, to make thee a minister and a witness both of these things which thou hast seen, and of those things in the which I will appear unto thee; delivering thee from the people, and from the Gentiles, unto whom *now* I send thee, to open their eyes, and to turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan unto God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins, and inheritance among them which are sanctified by faith that is in Me^q."

To say, as some do, that these words were not spoken by Christ, but that St. Paul has here transferred to Christ words which Ananias afterwards said to him by Christ's command; or, as others, that though spoken by Christ, they were not actually delivered when Jesus met him near Damascus, but in the vision he had in the temple some years afterwards,—appears to me to be such a departure from the fairness and simplicity of Scripture interpretation, that I dare not adopt it. For the words make part of the sentence in which He bids him rise from the earth and stand upon his feet; and in the 19th and 20th verses we find him obeying the call, and immediately preaching Christ to them of Damascus. It is no objection to this that the Lord bade him "go into the city,

ⁿ Acts ix. 6.^o Gal. i. 10.^p Compare Luke iii. 10—14.^q Acts xxvi. 16—18.

and it should be told him what he should do^r;" for Ananias might instruct him at much greater length than the narrative informs us, during his stay at Damascus. I therefore take the word of God as I find it, and adore the unsearchable riches of the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, (how must the soul of this penitent sinner have been melted by it!) who, instead of casting him out of his sight, or leaving him in the pangs of suspense, not only put away his sin as instantaneously as He did that of David, "but even chose him for a witness of his power over the souls of men, and for a herald of the Gospel to the heathen world. After such an experience, it naturally became the business of Paul's life to preach the power of grace, and to shew by his own example how possible it was for the Lord of Glory to lay down even his bitterest enemies as a stool for his feet; that is, to transform them into the most enthusiastic friends^s." It is when men have *themselves tasted that the Lord is gracious*, that they are able to magnify the riches of God's grace; while those who have had little forgiven, and think, perhaps, that there is little to be forgiven, can speak as coldly and accurately about the length and breadth of Christ's love, as if they were measuring a mountain, or solving a problem.

I dare not say that it is a good thing to have been a great sinner, however God may sometimes overrule it for good; for it is an evil thing and a bitter. And if any say, "Let us do evil that good may come," and sin on, that grace may abound, their damnation is just^t. But this I say, that while they that seek God early shall find Him, and they that fear Him from their youth are commonly the most blessed in themselves and the most honoured instruments of usefulness to others,—yet God's thoughts are not our thoughts, nor our ways his ways^u. He does, when it pleaseth Him, deviate from his wonted course, and snatch men from the very jaws of hell, and make them illustrious monuments of his power to save, and patterns to those who, in after-times, believe in Jesus to life everlasting^v. He does employ them in his blessed service, and while He teaches them how great things they must suffer for his Name's sake, He bestows on

^r Acts ix. 6.

^s Olshausen.

^t Rom. iii. 8.

^u Is. lv. 9.

^v 1 Tim. i. 16.

them more grace, more faith, more courage, more hope, more love than their fellows,—avenges them of their cruel enemy, the devil, gives them souls for their hire, and many crowns of rejoicing in the day of Christ's appearing.

When Saul entered Damascus, he entered it as a blind man. For three days he was without sight, and neither did eat nor drink. What passed in his mind during those three days we are not told. Some think that he was in an agony of remorse and bitterness; others, that he was now favoured with some of those visions to which he refers in his Epistles. But all this is mere conjecture. The only thing we know for certain is that he was engaged in prayer, and that he saw in a vision a man named Ananias coming in and putting his hand on him, that he might receive his sight^x. And when that devout man came, instead of upbraiding him for his past conduct, he addressed him by the endearing title of brother. "Brother Saul!" O how that word of Christian kindness thrills through his soul! Not "Thou persecutor, wretch, murderer!" but "brother!"

Whatever a man has been aforetime—however injurious to ourselves, or to the Church of God—however base and vile, yet, as soon as ever we have good reason to believe that he truly repents, we should receive him as a brother, restore him in a spirit of meekness, and confirm our love to him, that he be not discouraged, nor swallowed up with over-much sorrow. "For who maketh thee to differ, and what hast thou that thou didst not receive?" Be thou therefore merciful, as thy Father also is merciful; and loving, as thy Saviour Christ is loving.

"Brother Saul, the Lord, even Jesus, that appeared unto thee in the way that thou camest, hath sent me, that thou mightest receive thy sight, and be filled with the Holy Ghost."

Saul, as we have already seen, had been called to be an apostle by the Lord Jesus Himself, and, though born as it were out of due time^y, he must not come a whit behind the very chiefest apostles^z, but have all "the signs of an apostle," and be "filled with the Holy Ghost." And it may be that Ananias was sent to lay his hands on him for this pur-

^x Acts ix. 11, 12.

^y 1 Cor. xv. 8.

^z 2 Cor. xi. 5.

pose, rather than one of the apostles, lest he might seem to derive his authority from them. Nay, it would seem from the order of the narrative, (though opinion is divided on the subject,) that, like Cornelius and his company, he received the Holy Ghost before he was baptized; and for the same reason, that there might be no doubt that he who had already received the gift of the Holy Spirit was, in spite of his recent persecution of the saints, a fit subject for the rite of baptism. For God's gifts are not absolutely tied to signs, even though of his own appointment, but He bestows or withholds them at pleasure, according to the counsel of his own will; albeit that will is ever directed by wisdom and equity.

And no sooner did Ananias lay his hands upon him, than "immediately there fell from his eyes as it had been scales, and he received sight forthwith, and arose and was baptized^a." He was already a true penitent, a true believer, and therefore a partaker of the Holy Ghost; and what was to hinder him from being baptized?—from being grafted into the Church of Christ, and having the promises of forgiveness of sin, and of his adoption into God's family, visibly signed and sealed to him? He now ate his meat with gladness of heart^b, and was strengthened in body as well as in soul.

"Then was Saul certain days with the disciples which were at Damascus,"—who no doubt received him with the same brotherly affection with which Ananias had done. "And straightway he preached Christ in the synagogues, that He is the Son of God." Having received his commission from Christ Himself^c, he lost no time in fulfilling it. He acted on the maxim of the inspired king—"Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might, for there is no work in the grave^d." The same eagerness and energy which he had once shewn in the cause of error, he now displayed in the service of truth. Believing that Jesus Christ was the Son of God^e, he boldly avowed it. No wonder that all that heard him were amazed, and said, "Is not this he that destroyed them which called on this Name in Jerusalem, and came hither with that intent, that he might bring them bound

^a Acts ix. 18.^b Acts ii. 46; Eccles. ix. 7.^c Acts xxi. 16—18; Gal. i. 1.^d Eccles. ix. 10.^e Acts viii. 37.

unto the chief priests?" "But Saul," so far from being disconcerted, "increased the more in strength, and confounded the Jews which dwelt at Damascus, proving that this is very Christ." "The path of the just is as the shining light, which shineth more and more unto the perfect day^f." He had now "clean hands," and waxed "stronger and stronger^g." He was no longer Saul the persecutor, but Paul the apostle of God, and of his Son Jesus Christ. The Lord had shewn him how great things he must suffer for his sake, and he was willing to suffer them. And though bonds and afflictions awaited him wherever he went, both from Jews and Gentiles, none of these things moved him, neither counted he his own life dear unto himself, so that he might finish his course with joy, and the ministry which he had received of the Lord Jesus. From henceforth we find him "in labours more abundant than the other apostles, in stripes above measure, in prisons more frequent, in deaths oft:" for "the love of Christ constrained him."

Thus he lived, and in this spirit he surrendered life; and when he saw his end approaching, and the hour of his martyrdom at hand, he cheered on his dear son in the faith, the youth Timothy, with such words as these: "But watch thou in all things, endure afflictions, do the work of an evangelist, make full proof of thy ministry. For I am now ready to be offered, and the time of my departure is at hand. I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith: henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, shall give me at that day: and not to me only, but unto all them also that love his appearing^h."

And now, brethren, let us apply to ourselves the subject we have been considering. Surely it ought to produce in us all great searchings of heart. We see in the early history of St. Paul, how easy it is to be deceived as to our real character in the sight of God. We may not be, like Saul, persecutors, blasphemers, injurious,—God forbid that we should be!—but with some good qualities we may be proud, self-righteous, narrow-minded, bigoted to our own opinions,

^f Prov. iv. 18.^g Job xvii. 9.^h 2 Tim. iv. 5—8.

self-deceived, with a name to live, and yet dead. Our Saviour has said, "Except ye be converted and become as little children, ye cannot enter into the kingdom of God¹." He said this to *his disciples*,—to those who thought themselves so advanced in religion, that they had just been disputing which of them should be the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. But He told them, that except their hearts were changed, and they acquired the temper of little children, and became humble and teachable, free from pride, and the love of precedence, and high notions of their own consequence, they could not so much as enter into the kingdom of heaven. And in Peter, who had long been his disciple, and thought himself strong in the faith, and an established Christian, He saw so much lurking pride, and self-preference, and ignorance of his own weakness and corruption, that He said to him, "When thou art converted, strengthen thy brethren." We see, then, that it is not having gone the lengths of Saul that makes conversion necessary, but that the most moral, and amiable, and warm-hearted, and popular, and in many respects praiseworthy characters, may nevertheless have that corruption lurking in them, which lays them open to the temptations of Satan; and that if Jesus did not pray for them, and shew them to themselves, and convict them of sin, and lay them low in the dust of self-abasement, and convert them, they would be sifted as wheat, and perish everlastingly. Ought we not, then, to suspect ourselves, and to pray, "From all blindness of heart and self-deception; from all errors of judgment and education; from pride, vain-glory, and uncharitableness; from self-seeking, boasting of ourselves, and despising of others; from false zeal, impatience of contradiction, and neglect of honest and impartial enquiry into truth; and from all the crafts, and assaults, and siftings of the devil, good Lord deliver us?"

My brethren, are we conscious of having experienced a divine change? I do not ask *when* it took place, but *has* it taken place? Saul the Pharisee was naturally proud, self-righteous, bold, bigoted, and disdainful: but Paul the Apostle was humble and meek, deeply convinced of sin,

¹ Matt. xviii. 3.

gentle, patient, and loving. In the beautiful description which he draws of that most excellent gift of charity, he gives us, though quite unconsciously, a striking likeness of himself as a successful imitator of his Lord. Has a change of this kind taken place in you? By nature we are strangely ignorant of ourselves, and of our own peculiar faults and corruptions. We are ignorant of the extent and spirituality of God's holy law. We do not consider that causeless anger is a breach of the sixth commandment, and an unchaste look of the seventh. We are more prone to measure ourselves by others, than by the Word of God. But by grace we come to the knowledge of ourselves, we find out the sins which most easily beset us, we discover our deviations from God's pure and perfect rule. We are ashamed and confounded at the sight of our sinfulness and corruption: we did not think it had been half so great. And, worse than all, we find by painful experience that we have no power of ourselves to help ourselves, and that all those confessions of depravity and helplessness in the Bible and Prayer-book which we have been accustomed to think belonged to others rather than ourselves, or if to us, in a mitigated sense, and as graceful expressions of humility rather than stern realities, are in truth the well-selected words which in their plain and obvious meaning best express the changed feelings of our now contrite hearts. We see our need of mercy—we lie low at the Cross of Christ—we feel that none but He can do helpless sinners good. We begin to see heights, and depths, and lengths, and breadths in his love which we did not before perceive. We have done with all idea of merit, and fully enter into the apostle's statement, that God, who is rich in mercy for his great love wherewith He loved us, even when we were dead in sins, hath quickened us together with Christ, and that by grace we are saved through faith, and that not of ourselves, but the gift of God; not of works, lest any man should boast^k. And we can "bless the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who hath blessed us with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ, according as He has chosen us in Him before the foundation of the world, that

^k Eph. ii. 4, 5, 8, 9.

we should be holy and without blame before Him in love¹:" and this, we are sure, is our hearts' desire, and constant prayer, and earnest endeavour.

Now, my brethren, has anything of this kind taken place in your souls, and are you "increasing in spiritual strength," and being more and more "transformed by the renewing of your mind" into the image and likeness of God? Does your religion expose you to any trials from the world? If it does not, it affords grounds for suspecting its reality. Does your religion enable you to overcome the sins by which you are most easily beset? If it does not, it must be sadly wanting in life and power. Does it gain an answer to your prayers? If it does not, those prayers must be very different to those of Saul, when the Saviour said of him, "Behold, he prayeth!" Does it bring you inward peace, and a good hope, through grace, that God is your Father and Friend in Christ Jesus? Have you the Spirit bearing witness with your spirit that you are a child of God and an heir of the kingdom? All this Paul had, and more. I do not ask whether you have it in the same *degree* with him, but is your experience the same in *kind*? O do not deceive yourself in a matter of such deep importance, but seek to know the truth. And if you have reason to fear that this necessary change has not passed upon you, O seek it at once, and seek it from Him who alone is able to reveal his Son in you, to give you the knowledge of yourself, and the knowledge of Him "whom to know is life eternal." O that it may be said of you this very night, "Behold, he prayeth!" for this is one of the earliest manifestations of spiritual life. And O that each one of us on whom the Spirit of grace and supplication is poured, may, like Paul, increase in strength, and be most useful in his generation, and finish his course with joy, and at length shout Victory through the blood of the Lamb.

¹ Eph. i. 3, 4.

SERMON XVII.

THE REPENTANCE OF KING SAUL.

BY

ARCHIBALD CAMPBELL, LORD BISHOP OF LONDON

THE REPENTANCE OF KING SAUL.

A SERMON,

PREACHED IN

THE CHURCH OF ST. MARY-THE-VIRGIN,
OXFORD,

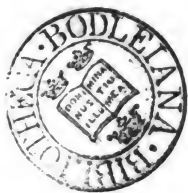
ON WEDNESDAY, MARCH 24, 1858.

BY

ARCHIBALD CAMPBELL,
LORD BISHOP OF LONDON.

OXFORD,
AND 377, STRAND, LONDON:
JOHN HENRY AND JAMES PARKER.

M DCCC LVIII.



A SERMON,

&c.

1 CHRON. x. 13, 14.

“ So Saul died for his transgression which he committed against the Lord, even against the word of the Lord, which he kept not, and also for asking counsel of one that had a familiar spirit, to enquire of it; and enquired not of the Lord: therefore he slew him, and turned the kingdom unto David the son of Jesse.

WE have no right to understand this account of the causes of King Saul's death in Chronicles, as referring it to one act of his life. It speaks as well of his general transgression against the Lord, as of his particular rebellion in the matter of the Witch of Endor. Some have complained that the Book of Chronicles should select the particular act of turning to the witch in his despair, as if it were King Saul's most heinous offence; whereas, it is urged, he perpetrated other deeds far more heinous, as, for example, the atrocious murder of the priests recorded in 1 Samuel xxii. This murder was indeed so bad, that, as Saul could not persuade his soldiers to execute it, but was obliged to commit it to Doeg the Edomite, so the name of Doeg lived for centuries on account of it in the abhorrence of all true Israelites; and he was mentioned in their traditions with Balaam and Achitophel, as excluded for ever from all share in the blessings of the life to come. But there is no use in questioning what was Saul's worst act. These single acts, indeed,

in a bad career are much to be noted, though it may be useless to compare their degrees of wickedness; and some one of them—often one which seems no worse than others which have gone before it—proves to be the irrecoverable last step in the descent from which there is no rising. Think, my friends, very seriously of the awful responsibility, the frightful consequences, of these separate acts of sin. True, it is not the isolated acts which of themselves exclude from God's favour. The law indeed says, the man that sinneth in one single act shall die; for the want of perfect obedience is the breaking of the whole law: whereas the covenant of mercy has respect to the general state of mind, and acts, not in accordance with that general state, may spring up from human weakness, and bring shame on a career of which they are not the natural result, but a violent interruption. We are shocked at times, in the lives of God's faithful servants, to read of strange acts of great unfaithfulness; and we are right to believe, according to the gracious Gospel of our Saviour, that for these acts, not suffered to become habitual, checked, repented of, there is abundant forgiveness in the merciful atonement of the Lord Jesus Christ. The separate isolated acts of sin do not in themselves exclude from God's favour, yet is the thought of them very awful,—whether they be sins of God's people, alien indeed from the general tone of the heart and conduct, but shewing such weakness, and such a spring of wickedness within as makes us tremble, lest the man who seems hitherto to have prospered by the blessing of God's grace, may make shipwreck of his faith; or whether they be not alien from the general tone, but its natural upgrowth,—the outward proof of a heart within which does not love God, but loves iniquity. God grant us all to be very watchful against these separate sinful acts. It may be an act of which the world thinks little; yet if it is a step on the road to hell, we cannot exaggerate its importance. It may be making our destruction certain: some one such act will be the last step downwards, beyond which there is no repentance. Saul consulted the witch the night before he died; and whether it was his worst offence or no, it was the immediate precursor

of his destruction, the last drop which made the cup of vengeance overflow: there remained for him no other recorded act of sin before his self-murder. Look well, my friends, when you leave this church, to the next sin you are tempted to commit, be it great or be it small; check yourselves, pray to God to give you strength for Christ's sake, that you may resist it, for if indulged, it may prove a step on the road to destruction from which there is no receding. God knows whether your next sin may not be your last act, and leave you hopeless, notwithstanding all that a merciful God and Saviour has done to preserve your souls.

We are to consider now King Saul's repentance. This is our prescribed subject.—But was he not a man who lived and died without repentance? In one sense—the highest sense of repentance—he was; in another, he was not. Saul was not a man who lived all his days without sorrow for his sins, but he was a man (so far as we can judge) whose heart was never changed by God the Holy Ghost from evil. What a picture is that which the narrative of the life and death of Saul sets before us! How is this old history full of the plainest practical teaching for men of every age, however different may seem their outward circumstances from those of the gloomy king. A modest, retiring youth called unexpectedly to a great office and responsibility; very unwilling at first to be put forward amongst his brethren,—how must congratulating friends have pressed round him and his father in that humble home at Gibeah, when it was now the declared will of God that the youth hitherto thought little of should be the ruler and deliverer of his people. Yet when any one has looked back now with the calm judgment of posterity through thirty centuries; or even if his surviving friends looked back but forty years, when the news spread of his death, and the great disaster of Gilboa, must it not have appeared very doubtful whether what was deemed the auspicious morning of his being raised from his rude country life to be a king, was not really the worst morning that had ever dawned on him? Had the modest youth lived on in his retirement, might he not, whilst following the herds from the

field, and living quietly an uneventful life amongst his own family, have been screened from those many temptations which afterwards assailed and ruined him? There are certainly good points noted in his character besides this early modesty. He does not seem to have taken offence at the resistance which his claims met with from those children of Belial who despised him, as we read 1 Sam. x. 27. He was contented to wait quietly for a recognition of his high calling, till he should be summoned by some great emergency to arise and shew himself capable of being the defender and avenger of his brethren. And then he rose at once to meet the danger, when it did come; yet would he suffer no one to be punished for any despise done to him^a. These things shew many of the elements of a great and good spirit, even though we may understand the mocking proverb, "Is Saul also among the prophets?" to speak of some known transgressions of his reckless youth. Might not his good qualities have been fostered, and his evil propensities restrained, in a quieter sphere? We know how through his life he had his fits and starts of holier impulses; how, thrown into the company of the prophets, he was on two separate occasions^b strangely stirred in spirit to join them; how, even in his most hopeless days, his heart was moved to pity and returning love towards the man whom he most intensely hated. Nothing can be more touching than that gushing forth of Saul's better nature at the call of David's generous forbearance, when the man he had so long persecuted is represented as sparing his life for the second time^c in the trench on the hill of Hachilah: "I have sinned; return, my son David, for I will no more do thee harm, because my soul was precious in thine eyes this day: behold I have played the fool, and have erred exceedingly^d." He speaks here in his age as you might have expected from him in youth. How often does the contrast between the good promise of youth and the miserable failure of age call up the same thoughts. We recall our remembrance of the open countenance of the fair boy, and ask

^a 1 Sam. xi. 13.^b Ibid. x. 10; xix. 23.^c Cf. chs. xxiv., xxvi.^d Ibid. xxvi. 21.

whether he can be indeed the same as the old man now before us, whose lines are deeply marked with craft or a sensual life. But indeed they are but vain dreams, which would make us think that a man's character is the creature of circumstances; that Saul, who failed so miserably as the king, might have had all that was good within him nurtured and matured, had he passed his days in his father's quiet farm. Believe this, that whatever be a man's lot in life, high or lowly, he will find ample room in it for those temptations to self-will, and headstrong self-indulgence, and envy, which proved so ruinous to Saul in his kingly power, but which would have been equally dangerous to him amid the petty details, the mean tyrannies, and fretfulness of an uneventful country life. The heart that is really turned to God has as ready opportunities of cultivating heavenly grace in a shop or farm as in a kingdom. He who does not love God in his heart, and has not his will subdued to God, rebels and frets against Him in the little incidents of daily home life, as he would if he were tempted by the glittering prizes of glory and unrestrained power. The simple question respecting each of ourselves as respecting King Saul is this:—Brimfull as my nature is of desires and tendencies that lead me to set up my own will and my own longings against the will of God,—am I resting in security, as if I repented of what is evil in me, because I know that here and there a better nature makes itself felt within, and now and then I do a generous or a self-denying act? Is this enough to satisfy me? or do I long for that true repentance which is indeed a change of heart?

Ah, my friends, without this there is no safety! No promise of youth will bear good fruit in your maturity, unless the Holy Spirit of God changes your whole hearts. You may go on and pass some seventy years of a fickle, chequered life without any great crimes; there may be impulses of good gushing back upon your hearts at times, making you deeply sorry for sins committed, and driving you to better resolutions; but if there be not the real recovery from the natural state, which is estranged from God, these tossings to and fro from the changeful gusts of feeling will do you no good. The repentance which God acknowledges is not momentary

sorrow or good resolutions, soon repented of in the wrong direction; it is that thorough change of heart which works in us the steadiness of real Christian principle; which makes us, who have been baptised and reared as Christians, to love the Lord Jesus Christ above all things; to hold His favour dearer than life itself; to have no stronger desire than that our thoughts, and feelings, and life may be conformed to His holy will;—in a word, which fills us with real, abiding Christian faith. Such a change the history leads us to believe King Saul never knew; and therefore all his fitful impulses of repentance but led him at last to the gloom of despair.

How many calls to repentance, my friends, have sounded in our ears? Not to speak of times past—this very season, with its collects, its lessons, and all those special earnest appeals which have called aloud to each of us—shall they not force us before we sleep to ask and answer this question,—Have I repented by a change of nature? Has God the Holy Ghost made me a real servant of God in Christ? I know that the Lord loves me with an everlasting love. Has the spectacle of His dear Son dying to save me so won my heart that it is given up to Him? Then shall I earnestly long and strive no more to resist or grieve Him. If I fail through the weakness of my nature, I shall be filled with horror for my failures; my daily repentance then will be the inevitable result and proof that I have truly repented through the change of heart.

And now, that we may estimate how far King Saul's heart was or was not changed, we must look at his separate acts of sin. Sins are only the more alarming if they are deliberately indulged in after the motions of the Spirit of God have been stirring us to holiness. Now so strong were these impulses from above in the earlier part of Saul's life, that we even read, chap. x. 10, that after his first interview with Samuel, "God gave him another heart." Alas! his after-life shews that this change was not an abiding change; that he sinned away the grace God offered him, so that the Spirit of the Lord left him, and an evil spirit took its seat in his heart. A warning here for all of us, that true change of heart must be abiding.

Sin springing up, reckless self-indulgence, may blight and destroy feelings of good which gave such hopeful promise at first that they seemed to speak of the full abiding change. My friends, let none of us trust to early religious feelings and resolves. They may, indeed, make us hopeful; but hope, to be secure, must be rooted in watchfulness and prayer; there must be no self-reliance in it. God will keep us safe, if we trust ourselves to Him. But without humble dependence on Him there is no safety, even if the good stirred up within us seems for a time to have made us new men.

And now look at the recorded acts by which Saul grieved God's Spirit. How comparatively trivial does that sin appear to many which is recorded in the thirteenth chapter. He was waiting with his people for a conflict with their powerful enemies, "and all the people followed him trembling. And he tarried seven days, according to the set time that Samuel had appointed: but Samuel came not to Gilgal; and the people were scattered from him. And Saul said, Bring hither a burnt offering to me, and peace offerings. And he offered the burnt offering. And it came to pass, that as soon as he had made an end of offering the burnt offering, behold, Samuel came: and Saul went out to meet him, that he might salute him. And Samuel said, What hast thou done? And Saul said, Because I saw that the people were scattered from me, and that thou camest not within the days appointed, and that the Philistines gathered themselves together at Michmash; therefore said I, The Philistines will come down now upon me to Gilgal, and I have not made supplication unto the Lord: I forced myself therefore, and offered a burnt offering. And Samuel said to Saul, Thou hast done foolishly: thou hast not kept the commandment of the Lord thy God, which He commanded thee: for now would the Lord have established thy kingdom upon Israel for ever. But now thy kingdom shall not continue." Was not this a trivial offence? Are not Samuel's denunciations somewhat harsh? Might we not plead that the king even shewed a religious spirit by thus sacrificing to the Lord God? But self-will was at the root of the act—that self-will which poisoned all Saul's after-life. He knew this; his conscience had evidently smitten him

when he saw that, after having waited seven days, he had no sooner impatiently refused to wait longer, than his rashness had been proved, by the arrival of Samuel, to be as unnecessary as it was wrong. He seems to shew this in what sounds like a sort of half-cowardly excuse in ver. 12: "I forced myself, and offered a burnt offering." The outward act may appear to us trivial, yet in a kingdom, the arrangements of which were all appointed by God, and carefully fenced round by His command, it was a serious matter for the king, like the ancient Pagan kings, to arrogate to himself the priest's office. And however the act might seem before men, God, reading the heart, saw in it the risings of a self-willed, dangerous spirit, which unchecked would be sure to be Saul's ruin. Therefore Samuel's stern rebuke, and the threatening of punishment, might have been as useful for the discipline of Saul's soul, as, five hundred years before, the knowledge of the punishment God would bring on him by refusing him an entrance into the promised land, was to the rising impetuosity of Moses. God reads the heart; He sees the hidden roots of all our actions; He knows, and would ward off, our danger. It is in mercy that He checks us often by stern reproof, and denying us the worldly good things on which we have set our affections. Happy those whom His reproofs arouse to earnest self-examination! God grant us, my friends, ever to listen to His voice, whether it speaks through a reproving friend, or by the whispers of the conscience. A fault checked by cherished hopes defeated, may be the means of saving us. Had Saul, smarting from the reproof which told him that the kingdom should not continue to his house, now looked more carefully within, this unpleasant reproof might have saved him from a reckless course: the doubts he evidently felt whether what he had done was right, might have become true and abiding repentance. But Saul's course from this point is certainly not one of improvement and growth in grace.

The rash vow by which he forbade the people to taste any food, recorded in the next, the fourteenth chapter, which reduced his army to great straits, and had all but cost the life of Jonathan, seems to shew the same unchecked im-

petuosity, reckless in its self-willed way of honouring God. Here, however, we read of no reproof following. Dissatisfied, doubtless, with his rashness, and the evil that sprang from it, he was left to think the matter over by himself. God does not always interfere to give us audible warnings, and Saul's heart was growing too hard to speak very intelligibly in its upbraidings.

There soon follows, in the fifteenth chapter, what seems to stand out as the crowning act of self-will in his earlier years—the sparing of the Amalekites. This, whatever else we may think of it, is certainly set before us as a distinct act of disobedience. It has been often noted also, that there are other features in Saul's conduct in this matter besides his disobedience: there is the meanness of a hypocritical half-obedience, in following out the Lord's purpose where it could be done with no cost, (ver. 9) "everything that was vile and refuse, that they destroyed utterly;" and then there is in the greeting to Samuel the aggravation of a pretence of obedience, when the king knew in his heart that he had not obeyed: (ver. 13) "Blessed be thou of the Lord: I have obeyed the commandment of the Lord." No wonder that Samuel's wrath was kindled, and that his rebuke was very sharp. It needed this to make Saul acknowledge, or even understand, his own real motives: (ver. 23) "Rebellion is as the sin of witchcraft, and stubbornness is as iniquity and idolatry. Because thou hast rejected the word of the Lord, He hath also rejected thee from being king." And then follows the confession in ver. 24, and the meanness is acknowledged, so often found in those who forsake plain duty. If God has spoken, man must obey; and if we try to escape from obedience, other motives will insinuate themselves, even those which are alien to the man's general character. The reckless Saul had in this matter become the slave of his own soldiers, unless in thus accusing himself of a cowardly fear of them while he did not fear to disobey God, he is even now playing with his conscience, while trying to shift the greater portion of the blame to them, shewing that the repentance he avows is not real: (ver. 24) "Saul said, I have

transgressed the commandment of the Lord, and thy words : because I feared the people, and obeyed their voice."

The agony which followed when the king rushed after the retiring prophet, and sought to hold him by his mantle, shews certainly that Saul's conscience was not dead. Yet in what he says there is perhaps too much desire to save appearances : "Honour me now, I pray thee, before the elders of the people." This thought seems almost more prominent than sorrow for what was wrong. Yet doubtless he was deeply moved; he speaks the real feelings of his better nature when he says, "I have sinned." But was this repentance real? It would seem not. God knew his heart, and Samuel knew it; and we read, ver. 35, that he "mourned for Saul:" he saw that with all the stirrings of his conscience, he was not really moved to turn to God. Indeed, these earlier acts of Saul's rebellion were but the precursors of what was worse.

This would be proved at once, if we had time to trace his after career. This solemn reproof in the matter of the Amalekites might have been the turning-point of Saul's life; but though Samuel henceforward mourned for Saul, the king does not seem to have mourned for himself. How alarming is this lesson! Warnings disregarded, first sins lightly healed without deep repentance, but lead to worse sins. Hitherto Saul's recorded offences were more or less of a ceremonial character; henceforward there is no question, even on the most common worldly principles, of his rapid degeneracy. Hitherto it is reckless self-will, with a mixture of some meanness which leads him to think lightly of the letter of God's commands; now all gives way to the one master passion of envy. The man who worships self is an easy prey to envy; and envy is a deadly poison working in the soul till, if uncured, it drives us even to madness. In what immediately follows in the history, we are introduced to the life of David. The great exploit of the shepherd-boy must have called forth the full admiration of every generous soul: but ch. xviii. 7 tells us, "The women answered one another as they played, Saul hath slain his thousands, and David his ten thousands.

And Saul was very wroth." His consciousness that, by his disobedience, he had himself lost God's favour, fanned the dangerous flame when he thought of the favoured youth:—"They have ascribed unto David," he says, "ten thousands, and to me they have ascribed but thousands: and what can he have more but the kingdom? And Saul eyed David from that day forward." Oh the misery of a jealous spirit! there is no religion where there is jealousy; self has swallowed up love to God and love to our neighbour: and Saul indulged his gloomy passion. There was no repentance now. The evil spirit, we read, came upon the king, and he sought David's life. Saved from the sudden cast of the javelin, David escaped, and behaved himself wisely, and Saul's hatred was turned into fear. Jealousy is not more miserable than it is degrading. Alas for Saul now! this one absorbing passion seems to fill his whole soul. How contemptible are the devices by which he seeks at first to gratify his malicious rage; how true to nature is the outburst against Jonathan, chap. xx. 30, when the wicked passion, lashed to madness by being thwarted, bursts forth in an attempt on his own son's life: "Then Saul's anger was kindled against Jonathan, and he said unto him, Thou son of the perverse rebellious woman, do not I know that thou hast chosen the son of Jesse to thine own confusion, and unto the confusion of thy mother's nakedness? For as long as the son of Jesse liveth upon the ground, thou shalt not be established, nor thy kingdom." And when Jonathan answered, "Saul cast a javelin at him to smite him: whereby Jonathan knew that it was determined of his father to slay David."

The king obviously is lost now, and there is no compunction, for he cherishes his sin. Soon after follows the atrocious massacre of the priests, (chap. xxii.); four score and five persons that did wear a linen ephod, besides their women and children, ministers of God, all murdered in cold blood from the same cause,—the one absorbing madness of jealous hatred against David; and Saul seeks David's life now in arms, as he had sought it before by treachery. And now his own life hurries to its miserable close. He feels that he

is deserted of God, and that nothing prospers with him. How pitiable is the spectacle of his latter days ! Forsaken of God.—Why ? There can be no doubt, because of unrepented sin ; and now, though at times, as we have seen, moved to sorrow, not able to return, and God's face hidden from him. Is there anywhere a more melancholy picture than that of the deserted and despairing king in the witch's house, trying vainly to gain from evil spirits what he felt he could not hope from God. And is not his turning to the vain devices of necromancy a standing proof to the last that his heart was estranged from God. So estranged that it seemed as if now he could not turn. Read the details of that sad night in the 28th chapter, vers. 20—23 :—" Then Saul fell straightway all along on the earth, and was sore afraid : . . . and there was no strength in him ; for he had eaten no bread all the day, nor all the night. And the woman came unto Saul, and saw that he was sore troubled, and said unto him, Behold, thine handmaid hath obeyed thy voice, and I have put my life in my hand, and have hearkened unto thy words which thou spakest unto me. Now therefore, I pray thee, hearken thou also unto the voice of thine handmaid, and let me set a morsel of bread before thee ; and eat, that thou mayest have strength, when thou goest on thy way. But he refused, and said, I will not eat. But his servants, together with the woman, compelled him ; and he hearkened unto their voice. So he arose from the earth, and sat upon the bed." The events of that wretched night are a fit introduction to the melancholy morning of Gilboa. How are the mighty fallen ! How have the early hopes and returning longings after good all ended miserably ! No wonder that the degraded king seeks death by his own hand, when life has become intolerable. Read here, my friends, all of you, the melancholy end of self-will and evil passions long indulged, till the soul becomes their slave, and all hope is gone, and God with it. There is not one of us here present, before whom the like melancholy course may not lie, if the mercy of God in the Lord Jesus Christ do not grant to us a tender conscience, a determination to resist the love of

self and every motion of jealousy,—a hearty sorrow for every sin into which we fall, an earnest purpose to repel sin, and a power of earnestly clinging to God in all our difficulties. The reckless, self-willed life must lead to a death without hope.

And here, before we close,—Was Saul mad? On this question we need say but a very few words. The evil spirit which entered into him may have shewn its power, as in many of the possessed of the New Testament, through an ordinary malady. But whether he were mad or no, he was certainly not irresponsible. He knew what he was doing, and he knew that it was wrong; and he knew how he might have escaped from destruction—by humble, hearty repentance. There is a wonderful resemblance between the infatuation of indulged evil propensities and common madness. Especially is a jealous, violent, self-willed nature scarcely master of itself, as if possessed by common madness. Madman or sane, in some passages of his life, he knew well all through it what God loved, and what separates the soul from His favour. Alas! my friends, reason itself at times gives way before indulged evil desires.

It has often been noted, that Saul stands to David in the Old Testament as St. Peter to Judas in the New,—the two kings and the two apostles,—all partakers of great spiritual privileges,—all bearing about them the marks of human weakness; but David and St. Peter clinging to their Lord through an earnest, faithful repentance,—while in Saul and Judas, a long-continued indulgence, in the one of selfish jealousy, in the other of selfish avarice, placed them at last beyond hope, and each ended his own life by the last act of desperation. God is a merciful Father, who pardons sinners through the atoning blood. But it is the watchful, praying, conscience-stricken sinner who is recovered from the temporary dominion of sin, who does not become its slave, who is saved from utter estrangement from his merciful Father, and who therefore, though deeply troubled, does not lose his faith, his good heart and good hope, and his love. God grant us to be with the repentant David and repentant Peter,

clinging to their faith in the Lord they loved, not with the despairing Saul and Judas, who, though sorry for sin, never left it. Alas, alas ! this is the fate of most worldly men—to end a life of half-repentance and long-cherished favourite evil propensities, without God and without hope. God grant a far better fate to us, through the mercy of the Lord Jesus Christ.

SERMON XVIII.

THE REPENTANCE OF ST. PETER.

BY

THOMAS THELLUSSON CARTER, M.A.,

RECTOR OF CLEWER.

THE REPENTANCE OF ST. PETER.

A SERMON,

PREACHED IN

THE CHURCH OF ST. GILES,
OXFORD,

ON FRIDAY, MARCH 26, 1858.

BY

THOMAS THELLUSSON CARTER, M.A.,

RECTOR OF CLEWER.

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M DCCCLVIII.

20.



A SERMON,

&c.

ST. LUKE xxii. 61, 62.

“And the Lord turned, and looked upon Peter. And Peter remembered the word of the Lord, how He had said unto him, Before the cock crow, thou shalt deny Me thrice. And Peter went out; and wept bitterly.”

ST. PETER's repentance is the only instance recorded in the New Testament of a perfect recovery after a fall from grace. The awfulness of his fall was that he fell in the midst of religion. The full gift of the Holy Ghost at Pentecost had not, indeed, as yet been poured forth; but Peter had passed three years full of moving incidents, replete with grace; full of acts of faith, love, self-sacrifice,—after special revelations vouchsafed to himself alone; after being pronounced “blessed;” after having a personal share in miracles and mysteries; after being washed by our Lord's own hands; after feeding on the Body and Blood of God Incarnate. So mighty must such grace have been, so sweet such communion, so blissful its inward light, that to fall from it and need to be converted again is not, indeed, unprovided for in the New Covenant,—God forbid!—but is unlooked for, as it were, is something out of the ordinary laws of grace. Like the case of the penitent thief, which is the singular instance of conversion from deadly sin at the last hour of life; so is St. Peter's recovery the singular instance of a return to God after he had been so found and then lost again.

Yet these are not to be looked upon as isolated cases.

They are types to be over and over again renewed ; samples of great laws of love ; of infinite outgoings of the grace of the Atonement repairing its own losses. And St. Peter is an unfailing witness to the end of time, that penitents may attain the highest places of the kingdom. The encouragement which his recovery gives to penitents of all ages is a perpetual fulfilment of the blessing which was not limited to his own lifetime :—" When thou art converted, strengthen thy brethren." That one so great should so fall is humbling to the highest of the saints ; but that having so fallen, he should be so restored, is the hope of all who have in any measure " done despite to the Spirit of grace."

For the wonder of St. Peter's repentance is its perfectness ; his more than restoration ; his rise to a far higher sanctity than he had before attained ; his rapid advance to perfection from that very hour. St. Augustine has taught that a perfected repentance is a rarer miracle of mercy than an uniform faithfulness. But so great was St. Peter's repentance, that he never lost his distinguished place among the apostles. He arose almost in the moment of his fall. The completion of his repentance superseded the necessity of penance. Even though our Lord's thrice-repeated charge, " Feed My sheep," be understood as a renewal of a forfeited commission, in compensation for his threefold denial ; yet those words involved no period of probation to test the reality of his repentance. Grace had already repaired all the loss, and clothed him even with yet higher gifts.

St. Peter's was a mixed character. Great strength, and, as often happens, equally great weaknesses, were mingled in him. His danger lay in his strength as much as in his weakness. His fall was not a mere sudden surprise ; it arose out of very serious faults of character. Let us note some of the causes of his liability to fall, of which Satan took advantage. One fearful fact in the history of the soul is, that early sins, though long put away, if not constantly watched against, break out again, sometimes more violently than before, under sudden temptations in unexpected forms. St. Peter is an instance of this. Evidently he had greatly sinned in his youth. His first shrinking from our Lord's approach,

“Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord,” betokens it. When under his temptation, he “began to curse and to swear;” and we cannot suppose such evils to have at that time first arisen. They must have been a return of the habits of earlier life, scars of a violent and irregular temper not wholly healed. There was also in him a presumption and self-sufficiency which always threatened a fall. Human temerity could hardly have soared higher, than when he said, “Though I should die with Thee,” (some of the Fathers understood it *for* Thee,) “yet will I not deny Thee in any wise.” And again, what immediately occasioned his fall was a moral cowardice strangely mingled with extreme physical boldness; for just before his alarm at the notice of a maid-servant in the judgment-hall, he would have risked his life single-handed against the whole Roman band in the garden of Gethsemane. With these serious defects, there was a variable impetuosity of feeling constantly bringing out into great prominence the good and evil, the strength and weakness of his character; as upon the lake, when one moment he would walk upon the water with his Lord, and the next was ready to sink with fear.

The circumstances of his temptation were peculiarly trying to such a character. His Master in the hand of His enemies, overpowered, unresisting; the disciples fled, and concealing themselves; the traitor successful in his treason; the very rabble of the city triumphing; himself become the jest of a losing cause; and no sound, no sign from heaven to justify the long-cherished faith. How difficult have some here, perhaps, found it to confess Christ amidst humiliation; to resist the jeer; to bear up consistently, when the heart’s faith has sunk in trial or despondency. Let such as have been thus tested, seek to realize St. Peter’s trial before they speak lightly of his fall. Rather, have not all cause to watch lest they should give way, and risk in some form or other the fearful condemnation—“Whosoever shall confess Me before men, him will I also confess before My Father which is in heaven; but whosoever shall deny Me before men, him will I also deny before My Father which is in heaven?”

Let us now consider the lessons which we may gather for our

own guidance. And first we learn the possibility of perfect repentance after grace has been forfeited ; of a return to God from sin committed after special favours and gifts of love. It is written, " If any man draw back, My Soul shall have no pleasure in him ;" but here we have a reversal of that terrible sentence. Again, it is written, " It is impossible for those who were once enlightened, and have tasted of the heavenly gift, and were made partakers of the Holy Ghost, and have tasted the good Word of God, and the powers of the world to come, if they shall fall away, to renew them again to repentance ;" but here we learn that even the denial of the Lord Who bought us does not involve this utter reprobation. We learn from Scripture that grace is given to improve and to increase ; that where it fails of this effect, the covenant of mercy is broken ; yet here we see how not merely the loss of grace, but the denial of the Author of grace, calls forth fresh love in restoring the breach and recovering the fallen.

If, then, some desponding soul here should be mourning inwardly, and say, " My case is different from that of all others : not only have I sinned against grace, but none can tell the warnings that I have neglected—the repeated warnings ; or what I once experienced of the love of God, and have despised ; or what sweet communion with Him I once had, and have lost : none can have sinned away such mercies, and still live." The answer to such despairing thoughts is easy. Could there be warnings more frequent, or more striking, than those given to St. Peter ? Could any one have held closer or more familiar communion with Jesus ? Could any have received more of the inner light of His love than one who had seen Him on the Mount of Transfiguration, and in the chamber of the blessed Sacrament, or during the Agony in the garden of Gethsemane ? And yet he denied his Lord, and after his denial was wholly restored.

Further, there was a wonderful mercy overruling St. Peter's fall, bringing out of it even greater good. It was made to teach him what otherwise he seemed unable to learn. He needed to learn distrust of self. With all his burning zeal, his devoted love, his entire self-sacrifice, his heart was closed against the idea of his own helplessness, of his own nature's utter weak-

ness, of its need of a continual stay on God. He prayed not when he heard of a fierce temptation coming. He did not watch one hour. He never questioned his own steadfastness. The idea of the utter feebleness of humanity in itself found no entrance into his soul. He must be left to his own unassisted nature to learn its liability to fall. His feeling had been, "*I will not deny Thee in any wise ;*" "*I am ready to go with Thee both into prison and unto death.*" And he was left to this his own personal strength. His trial was as much as to say, "*I take thee at thy word, and now see what thou, thy own nature, without Me, can do.*" He must meet Satan, alone, and unarmed. Thus in his shame, confusion, and tears of bitterness, he must learn to trust in Christ, and not in himself.

And thou who desponded at some past fall, hast thou no similar lesson to learn of deeper humility, of closer dependence on God ? Hast thou had no self-trust ? Has thy strength always been in prayer and watching ? Hast thou always borne in mind the utter feebleness of human nature, and the perpetual need of casting it upon God as its only stay ? Have not thy very gifts been a snare, so that thou hast looked on them as thy own, as what would endure of themselves without continual grace ? May not, then, the sinking, the despondency which has followed thy fall, be the very means whereby thou wilt learn those truer lessons of thyself ? Until his fall, St. Peter was wanting in some of the very elements of the religious life, of the very conditions of advancement. He was wanting in humility, meekness, reverence, fear, and self-distrust. He was often contradicting his Lord,—"*Although all should be offended, yet will not I ;*" even reproving Him,—"*This be far from Thee, Lord ;*" even refusing proffered grace,—"*Thou shalt never wash my feet.*" We see nothing of this afterwards. How different is his after-tone :—" Why look ye so earnestly on us, as though by our own power or holiness we had made this man to walk ;" "*His Name, through faith in His Name, has made this man strong ;*" "*Repent ye, therefore, and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out, when the times of refreshing shall come from the presence of the Lord.*" And the key-note of his Epistles is,

"Be clothed with humility." "Be sober, and watch unto prayer."

May not this be *thy* case—that the foundations of thy life need to be laid lower, in a more perfect self-abasement; a deeper humility; a more entire leaning upon God, a more complete abandonment of all high thoughts, independence of will, self-glorying, vanity, spirit of contradiction, and such-like; that beginning afresh, these hindrances being removed, thou mayest hide thyself from thyself, hide thyself in a perpetual recollection of the Divine presence and support, as the only stay and safeguard of thy frail, ever-falling humanity?

Moreover, St. Peter is not merely the assurance to us of the possibility of a perfect restoration after falling from God, he is also the model of all true penitents. God formed His Church out of the fallen, and He gave an example of the grace of repentance in one of the foundations of His Church, the one to whom it had been said, "On this rock I will build My Church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it." What could not be exhibited in our Lord, because He was without sin, was exhibited in His chief Apostle. As St. John is the true model of the progressive development of a supernatural life, so St. Peter of a perfected repentance. Let us study, then, a lesson which most surely more or less all of us need to read aright. We shall here see the true elements of character through which the grace of God works "a repentance unto salvation not to be repented of."

The first main element of St. Peter's recovery was a spirit of self-accusation, a ready acknowledgment of sin and error. This disposition he had shewn before. His outburst of remorse openly before his brethren, at his first call, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord," was a proof of it. He is the one only Apostle whom at his call we find on his knees in confession at the feet of his Divine Master. It was in the same spirit of ready confession that, when he heard our Lord say, "If I wash thee not, thou hast no part with Me," he instantly answered, "Lord, not my feet only, but also my hands and my head." And thus, in the very instant of his fall, the spirit of self-accusation deepened into its most touching form, and could express itself only in bitter tears

and silent anguish, as he covered his face and hurried out of the hall into the dark night, to be alone and weep. And yet, had the tendency of his mind been to catch at excuses, and extenuate his fault, and withhold the full confession, there were pleas ready, which, alas! we can imagine some of ourselves to have urged at such a time. "Why is my blame so great? All the disciples have fled. I have followed Thee even into the judgment-hall; I have ventured at the risk of my life. I did not mean to deny Thee; it was but an evasion, and it was to save my life; it was but to quiet the clamour, to escape the notice: my mind was stedfastly faithful all the while. Did I not lately, in the garden, I alone of all the disciples, take the sword and offer up my life?" How different is the whole attitude of the fallen apostle! How instantly does he rush to the full conclusion—to the sight of his sin, as it appeared in the eye of God! How entirely free is his manner from the least appearance of self-justification, which so slowly lets go one plea after another, clinging hold to one support for its pride after another, ready to do anything rather than acknowledge the guilt, irrespectively of all its consequences.

Here, then, is one essential element of true repentance—self-accusation at the feet of Jesus. And how needful a lesson to learn well. The saddest part of our sin is, that we are so slow to confess it. Sin ever gathers round it an array of self-defences. Subtleties and evasions, special pleadings, shrinkings from humiliation, lingerings of pride, all gather round the consciousness of sin, and rise up instantly to hinder the only remedy of guilt, the only hope of restoration. For it is a law of spiritual life, that there can be no release, no freedom, no return to the pure light and love of God, till the acknowledged sin is cast out of the soul, and laid at the foot of the cross. "Wash me thoroughly from my wickedness, and cleanse me from my sin: for I acknowledge my transgression, and my sin is ever before me," is the great penitent's inspired thought; the full acknowledgment, and then the perfect cleansing. They coincide as by a necessary law in the mystery of repentance. The unacknowledged guilt lies within the soul, a permanent hindrance to the

grace of God, as a blight that settles on the herb, gradually weakening all the powers of its inward life. Confess the guilt, let all self-excuses be surrendered, and the soul revives, as the green herb from which the gentle rain of heaven has cleansed all the blight away.

Again, from St. Peter we learn that faith is a main element of restoration, preserved to him through the intercession of His Lord:—"I have prayed for thee, that thy faith fail not." Now faith is not the belief of any particular dogma; nor is it the same as a spirit of assurance; neither is it any peculiar feeling appropriating some special promise; but it is the bent, the aim of the whole soul. It is the prevailing direction of all the powers of the man toward God; it is the apprehension of the inner man embracing, grasping the invisible; living in things which are unseen and eternal, and raising him out of the sphere of sight which lives in things that are temporal. Faith may lay hold of one particular promise at one time, of another at another. It has its unutterable convictions of peace; it has its own "witness of the Spirit;" its own "hidden manna;" "its white stone," with "the new name written on it, which no man can read but he who receiveth it." But faith is the posture of the whole inner man—the tenor and essence of his life. "The just shall *live* by faith." Through it the invisible affects the man more than the visible: the unseen stirs him to his depths, the seen touches only the surface of his life. This grace was eminently a characteristic of St. Peter. To him first the Father revealed the Son. He first confessed Christ; "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God." Afterwards, when the Lord taught the full doctrine of the Eucharist, the Communion of His Flesh and Blood, to be the life of the world; and many of His disciples went back and walked no more with Him; and Judas shewed the first signs of unbelief,—St. Peter was the one who accepted the mysterious words. "Then Simon Peter answered Him; Lord, to whom shall we go? Thou hast the words of eternal life." The same grasping at supernatural things led him to desire to walk on the water with his Lord. He was ever growing in the apprehension and realization of great invisible realities.

And thus he had learnt to regard sin in the light of another world—sin abstractedly in itself, as a loss of spiritual life, as a thing abhorrent to God, as an utter contrariety to all that his soul was aspiring after. Therefore, when the sense of the sin he had committed broke upon his soul, the judgment-hall, the excited scene before his eyes, the fear of death, the fear of scorn, all disappeared, and before his mental eye rose up the scenes by the lake of Galilee, and on the Mount of Olives, and in the journeyings by the way; the words of warning he had disbelieved now proved true; the many other words he could not understand at the time, now as surely about to be fulfilled; and his own promises so basely falsified. In the crowd of that judgment-hall he felt but the One presence of the Lord Who stood before him, and the look of that One Countenance alone, of all that were bent upon him as he hurried forth, fell on his heart and its floodgates of sorrow were broken up.

To rise thus above all the worldly consequences of sin, all its mere temporal effects, to read one's sin in the light of God's countenance, to view it as we shall view it on our death-bed, stripped of all accidents, with its awful consequences, as we pass into eternity,—this is the attribute of faith; and through the preservation of his faith, as our Lord assures us, St. Peter arose from his fall. Oh! how much need have we to pray, "Lord increase our faith;" that we may see our sins in their true form and colour. How much need to pray for increased inward light, that we may have "senses exercised to discern between good and evil;" that sins now lurking in us unseen may be made known to us; that sins we have long seen and confessed may be more abhorred; that we may know ourselves more as God knows us, by a quicker sensitiveness, by a purer light. The sense of sin depends on our view of sanctity. As we grow better, we see sin clearer. As we have more of God, we realize evil more vividly. The greatest saints are therefore the deepest penitents. The bright light of purity in which they live sets off more vividly the darkness of the spots which stain the field of their souls' life. The more they advance, the more truly they repent. As, e.g., we see more the power of truth, the more we are ashamed of

our deceptions. As we realize purity, so we shrink from our impurities. As we perceive love and largeness of heart, so we despise our selfishness. The more God shines into us, the more we loathe our own vileness. We judge by the contrast. Now faith reveals these supernatural sights of better things, and therefore it becomes an essential condition of a true repentance, for repentance is a loathing of our sin, as the vision of God grows within us.

There is one more feature of a true repentance which is exhibited in St. Peter. His repentance turned upon his love of the person of Christ. This had been long the moving principle of his life. His indignation at the idea of his Master's suffering; his refusing to be washed before the administration of the blessed Sacrament; his taking the sword, and then striking with it; his entering the judgment-hall,—were all impulses of a fervent, though unchastened, love; a love to our Lord's person. And this was the secret power of that look which our Lord, when He turned, cast upon him. The wounded love, the pity, the reproach, the renewed warning of mercy which that look expressed, caused his passionate outburst of grief. That piercing look revealed the feelings of that most loving Heart, with which his own heart was so bound up. And as love thus moved him to repentance, love was the secret principle of his life ever afterward, and therefore the Lord put to him the thrice-repeated question, "Lovest thou Me?" It was the secret grace of his perseverance, as it had been that of his conversion.

It may seem as though St. Peter's love to our Lord were too human, too much that of a man toward his fellow. It did indeed need chastening, increased reverence, more of that deep, adoring awe which St. John earlier learnt; and which St. Peter learnt at last in the shame and humiliations of his fall. But love to our Lord must needs be human,—human in its purest, highest form. The Incarnation of God has made an essential change in the relations between God and man, and so in the love that binds us. He took our nature, and abideth in that nature. He is Man eternal, as He is God eternal. The whole redeemed world would cease to exist, if He ever ceased

to be Man. He loves, and will evermore love us, in that nature, and through its sensations, and He draws us to love Him through the same nature, with the impulse of which humanity is capable. He loved with a human love, and He is to be loved in return with a human love. The love of Mary, of Lazarus, of the Magdalene, of St. John, St. Peter, above all, of His blessed Mother, were different forms of human love, according to the different dispositions of those different persons,—not ceasing to be human love, though purified, raised, sublimed, as it mingled with divine love, and became in them a wondrous mixture of the affections of grace and of redeemed humanity. As in the sacred Heart of Jesus human love and divine love exist, each of the highest order, and unite and beat together in one harmonious pulse, and are the bond and channel of communion between the blessed Trinity and a redeemed world, the source of all true life that flows into the veins of a restored humanity; even so in the heart of each one of His elect, formed in His image, according to the capacity of each, the affections of nature and of grace, human and divine, join together and combine in a mystery, which reflects the mystery of His own Heart of love. He consecrated the human affections to Himself in His human form as their proper end, so that through His Humanity they might centre upon the eternal Godhead. Therefore now and evermore to embrace Him, and cleave to Him in His deified human love, is the true aspiration of the purified human heart. Therefore penitent love has ever delighted to dwell on His Wounds, as the marks of His love, and of His sufferings for our sin; to pay devotion to His sacred Body; to realize the Agony of His Soul; to dwell on His human Countenance during His deep sorrows, on His sinking form, on His thorn-crowned Head, on His exceeding loud cry of death, in which He bowed beneath the consummated burden of sin. The sight of His sorrows in the shame of the judgment-hall touched the deepest chord of remorse in St. Peter's soul in that night of shame; the prolonged contemplation of His Crucifixion has ever since that hour produced the truest, deepest penitents, of all ages. Love is of the very essence of repentance, and love is ever associated with a person, and the true movement of the deepening and en-

during love of penitents circles around the Person of Jesus Christ and Him crucified.

In conclusion, I would briefly point out two habits of devotion necessary to be cherished, in order that the grace of such a repentance as we have been contemplating may be the more worked in us. One is the habit of meditation on the Person of Jesus Christ. It is evident from what has been said, that the realization within the soul of our Divine Master and His love, is the moving cause of true repentance. But how can this be realized or impressed, or become an object of influence, except through habitual contemplation? "Faith is the evidence of things not seen;" but how can faith realize the object, except by feeding on it, till it become an habitual vision of the soul? Again, love can be cherished only by habitual intercourse, or ever-renewed inward feeding on the beloved object. If there be no converse, or communion of thought, love must decline and die. And how can an invisible person become the object of love, except by inward contemplation. We may continue to use forms of words, and correct statements of doctrine, or we may have a general awe on the soul in the consciousness of God's presence and claims on us; or we may have instinctive feelings of right and wrong, which operate and stir the conscience; so that there may seem to be a stay for religion within the man. But it is not in the nature of the human heart to love another, unless that other become a constant companion, or unless his beauty and amiableness become strongly impressed on the soul, and be borne always in remembrance. The grace of God moves and operates according to the laws of humanity. Grace is above nature, but it is according to nature. It acts on nature, and raises nature up to the level of God, but it is human still. What, then, would stir the heart to love according to nature, the same will stir the heart to love above nature. And what is this but the contemplation of the object, followed by an habitual feeding upon it? And how otherwise can we love Christ? How otherwise can He have such influence over the soul, as to stir its depths, to awaken the deeper founts of sorrow, and the deeper yearnings after perfect conformity to Himself?

The second point is this: we must learn to measure the

guilt of our sins by the sorrows of God in the Flesh. We have no proper rule of our own by which to measure the guilt of sin. It is not an object of earthly barter. It falls under no earthly merchandise, on which a value has been set. Sin has a bearing on the world to come, on the condition of spirits, and the eternal relation between God and the creature. We have no line to fathom these depths. The consequences of sin are altogether out of our reach. When we attempt to trace its consequences, and describe its effects, we feel ourselves to be at once beyond our compass. Sin has converted angels into devils. Sin has ruined this lower creation of God. Sin brought the flood and the fire of Sodom, and it has in its train disease, and famine, and war. It has created death, and made death eternal. All these are as certain rules and proportions by which we can form some estimate of the guilt of sin. But they are partial and imperfect measures, after all. The only true and adequate measure is the Blood of God Incarnate and the sorrows of His sacred Heart. Have we any means whereby to measure the value of that most precious Blood and of that Agony? If we have not, then neither have we any means to measure the guilt of sin, for that Blood was given in exchange for the soul, and was the price of the sin. That Blood is the only price at which we can set it. There is a relation of co-ordinate value between the Blood of God and the sin of man; for the one was accepted as an equivalent for the other. And nothing else could be so accepted. Learn, then, to look at sin in this connexion; not sin in the aggregate, but individual sins. Measure by this price the special besetting sin of thy nature. Weigh it in the scale against the weight of that Sacrifice which bowed to the Cross the Incarnate God. There alone you read its true character, its amount in the estimation of eternity. As man learns to measure more truly the nature of God while he lives on, and time passes into eternity; so, as he lives on age after age, when time is no more, he will learn to measure better the guilt of sin. View the last sin which lies freshest on thy conscience by this estimate. The very next time thou art tempted, before thou sinnest, call up that awful Vision, the expression of that Face, with its untold

depth of sorrow and reproach, which fell on St. Peter in the judgment-hall, and the Body on which the Wounds are still visible in the heavens. Say, shall I add a fresh pang to that suffering form? Shall I do a deed which cost such a price to redeem? Could I bear the look of that Countenance, as I sin?

May there not be many among you to whom, at this moment, if the curtain should uplift its folds, and that Countenance could be revealed, It would be felt to express some such words as these?—"I have somewhat against you, because you have left your first love. Remember, therefore, from whence you have fallen, repent and do the first works; or else I will come unto you quickly, and will remove your candlestick out of its place, except you repent." But "to him that overcometh I will give to eat of the tree of life, which is in the midst of the Paradise of God."

SERMON XIX.

THE REPENTANCE OF ST. PETER.

BY

ANTHONY W. THOROLD, M.A.,

RECTOR OF ST. GILES-IN-THE-FIELDS, LONDON.

THE REPENTANCE OF ST. PETER.

A SERMON,

PREACHED IN

THE CHURCH OF ST. EBBE,
OXFORD,

ON FRIDAY, MARCH 26, 1858.

BY

ANTHONY W. THOROLD, M.A.,

RECTOR OF ST. GILES-IN-THE-FIELDS, LONDON.

21.

OXFORD,

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JOHN HENRY AND JAMES PARKER.

M DCCCLVIII.



A SERMON,

&c.

MARK xiv. 72.

“And when he thought thereon, he wept.”

THIS Divine Word is a volume of biography. It portrays for us, with every variety of outline and colouring, the men and women who rise on the surface of history as helping or hindering the planting of the Church in the world. And just as artists love to paint men in the attitude which shall best ensure the expression of the countenance and the contour of the form, so Holy Scripture delights to set forth to us this our human nature in that one condition which, as it is most common to it, so unburies to us its most hidden depths. Strong emotion uncovers a man to his fellows; and in that earthquake of the being which we call repentance, the coldest and most silent of men lose their reserve and self-consciousness in the loud and bitter cry, “What must I do to be saved?” Hence there is hardly a prominent character in Scripture that is not revealed to us in the nakedness of his penitent soul; and one glance at him as he kneels in his chamber and pours out his heart to God, is worth ten years of ordinary acquaintance. Now repentance, define it as you will, is the crisis of a man’s life. To some, as to the jailor at Philippi, it is the very travail-time of their

regeneration; to others, as to the son of Jesse, it is the blessed end of a reaction from heaven to earth; to all of us who are in Christ, in the ebbings and flowings of our sanctity, it is the echo of God's voice in us, revealing to us our garments soiled, or our first love forgotten, or our works not finished; and therefore, not unreasonably, we may look to find it again and again described in this wonderful book which contains the deepest philosophy without a system, and the most accurate history without a plan. We have the false repentances as well as the true. There is Esau by the tent-door at Beersheba, lifting up his voice and weeping over his lost blessing, but turning away to hate his brother Jacob, and to count the days till he may slay him; there is the weak Ahab, hopeful with Elijah, and wicked with Jezebel; there is Balaam trying to snatch two heavens, and missing both of them; there are Felix and Agrippa, startled to the very depths of their polluted souls—but struck by lightning, not softened with the dew and the rain. There is also David, fasting, and lying all night upon the earth; who as the weary wailing of a dying child comes to his ear, and tears his heart, sobs out his prayer for mercy. There is the thief on the cross, in the dim desire of his awakened soul for pardon, casting himself on the dying Galilean at His side; and the Apostle, in the grey dawn of that April morning, goes out to weep as if his heart would break, for the sin which yesterday he had thought impossible. To this repentance of St. Peter I have to draw your attention now. I have to ask you, with all the holy delicacy wherewith we should ever contemplate the sins of the just made perfect, to see why he fell, how he repented. But fully to do this, we must go one step back. To judge of the repentance, we must know the sin repented of; to measure the sin, we must behold the sinner. For each single act is the act of the whole man. Our past marks our present, and we can

never act with a part of our being ; and however much the will may have oscillated before it finally decided, it was no otherwise than entirely consenting to the act when done. And in the words of St. Peter himself, may He whose Divine power hath given us "all things that pertain unto life and godliness," multiply grace and peace to us through the knowledge of God, humility through the knowledge of ourselves.

The Man, the Sin, the Repentance. First, the Man. A multitude of things modify character over and above the original mind and heart given by God. A man's race, his birth-place and home, his early associates, his bringing-up, his means of living, are all to be ascertained, if we would fully carry out the inductive method in this matter ; are all to be allowed for, if we would rightly estimate any one. Simon, the son of Jonas, was a Hebrew, living in a town of some consequence on the shores of a remote lake in Galilee, "unlearned and ignorant," and earning his bread by the rough excitements of the fishing trade. His character—on the whole, a very noble one—had all those inferior qualities which invariably balance eminent virtues. Full of high passionate feeling, fervid in heart, impetuous in action, and impatient of delay, he found reflection painful ; to pause before acting was intolerable. Singularly ignorant of his own heart, and equally ignorant of that human nature of which most men at thirty years old have been compelled at their cost to learn so much, he mistook impulse for principle ; he confounded doing with intending to do. Self-confident, talkative, always in front, setting every one right in turn : yet active, faithful, affectionate, brave ; he was the first among the Twelve to discover Christ's Godhead, and it was he who came forth to say before them all, "Lord, to whom shall we go ? Thou hast the words of Eternal life." There never was a man whose sincerity was less to be suspected, or whose inconsistencies are more easily accounted for ; never

a man better fitted to govern an infant Church, when humbled and filled with the Spirit. We love him, if only for his love to Christ; nay, we are almost tempted to love his faults, for most of them were but the exaggeration of manly virtues; and the Rock of the Church is one of the twelve foundation-stones of the New Jerusalem, on which the living stones of God's spiritual house rejoice to think that they are reared. Such was the man; and now, considering ourselves lest we also be tempted, let us gravely and tenderly look into his Sin.

It was the eve of the crucifixion. The Paschal Lamb had been eaten. The sacerdotal prayer had been offered up, and the Lord, with the eleven, went out to Gethsemane. The rest of the Apostles left at a little distance, the three familiar friends in whom He chiefly trusted, the Lord took apart to be with Himself in His coming passion. The bitterest storm of sorrow that ever burst yet over the head of human creature, was now to spend its fury on the Lamb of God; and He who, a year before, in anticipation of this agony, had on the mount of glory received blessed consolation from Moses and Elias, now that He was to tread the winepress alone, desired to find comfort and sympathy from the chosen three. The storm came, as you know. Under the shade of the olive-trees, wrestled face to face with the tempter, He who had conquered him in the wilderness, who was about to destroy him on the Cross; and in the weary restlessness of His suffering,—for “His sweat last night was as great drops of blood,”—He went to and fro to His friends. Peter's denial was beginning. He slept; and that the Lord keenly felt the selfishness of his slumber, is sufficiently apparent from His addressing Himself to him: “Simon, couldest not thou watch with Me one hour?” Again He came—still he slept heavily. For the last time He came. He had seen the lights twinkling down the hill; the

oaths and jests of the soldiers hunting for their prey fell on the ear of Jesus, and told Him that His hour was come; still the three slept, but it mattered not: the Son of Man was betrayed into the hands of sinners. The sinners came, predestined in the counsels of God to slay His Son; some sleek and cunning, some rough and cruel, all bent alike on securing their prey, and doing surely their deed of blood. The second act of Peter's denial began. "Then Simon Peter having a sword drew it, and smote the high-priest's servant, and cut off his right ear." We see what the Lord thought of that deed by the rebuke He gave him. We see why St. Peter did it, in his vain-glorious desire to redeem his lost character, and to prove, even by blood, his love for the Lord. We also see what mischiefs came out of it; for not only was he now a marked man, but his first rashness led necessarily to a second rashness; and this spasmodic energy resulted in a reaction, which caused his fall. When the disciples fled, the apostle seems to have fled with them, but presently to have recovered himself. Whatever were his motives, it is clear that he retraced his steps; and coming up with the rear of the party, followed them until the Lord and His enemies passed into the high-priest's house, and he was shut out. It was God's will, however, that he should not escape the fiery trial. A face in the crowd had recognised him; the face, if not of Nicodemus, at least of some friendly Pharisee, who may have come to Jesus by night, and who would thus have fallen in with the apostle; and on the damsel at the door being spoken to St. Peter was permitted to pass through. He was now in the open court that was between the gate leading into the street and the hall of the house where the Lord was being examined before Annas. Had he wished it ever so, he would hardly have been permitted to pass on into the house. It is quite possible, that not from any ignoble desire of personal comfort, but from a mere in-

instinct of self-preservation, he sought the fire as the safest place, where he might be hidden in the crowd. But the trial of his faith was not to be long deferred. The servant at the gate, who had keenly watched him as he came in, instantly detected him standing by the fire and towards the light. She came and said, "Thou also wast with Jesus of Nazareth." He was thrown off his guard. Gathering from her remark that he was discovered, and, it may be, justifying himself by the plausible excuse that it was no business of hers to ask him, he put her off by affecting not to understand her,—*"I know not what thou sayest."* But he was not happy. He had silenced her; it was not quite so easy to silence conscience. Leaving the fire, he went into the porch, to seek an opportunity of slipping away. The cock crew. Did he hear it? He could hardly anticipate all that was to happen before it would crow again. In the porch he was no safer than by the fire. Where one had asked him before, three asked him now. The same maidservant who was so satisfied of his identity that she would not leave him alone, said to the other, *"This man is one of them."* Another maidservant, who may have taken the clue from her said, *"This man was also with Jesus of Nazareth."* A man-servant said the same thing. St. Peter was in terror. Attacked on all sides, and not knowing what they would do with him, he no longer hesitated to deny altogether his connexion with Jesus. He said with an oath, and his words have a bitter contempt in them, *"I know not the man."* For the next hour his sufferings must have been intense. Lost to himself, lost to Christ, lost to his brethren; longing to escape and hide his shame; yet fearing to make bad worse if he provoked observation by retiring too abruptly—he must have drunk deeply in the next hour of the gall and wormwood of his sin. And then his denial reached its climax. Evidently he had been conversing

with those that stood by; and whether in downright hardihood, or again, as a cloak to hide himself, or, possibly, in sheer desperateness, he had been making common cause with the Lord's foes. What happened was likely enough. His rough country accent was at once detected by the inhabitants of the metropolis; his speech betrayed him to be a Galilean; and if a Galilean, the probabilities were all in favour of his being a disciple of Jesus. So first one and then another said it, and for the crowning proof, one of the servants of the high-priest, whose kinsman Peter had wounded, said to him, "Did not I see thee in the garden with Him?" "He began to curse and to swear, saying, I know not the Man."

Such, my brethren, was the sin of the great St. Peter. The nature of it involved the essential elements of a real apostacy from God. The aggravations of it lay in the swelling words of vanity wherein he had so vaunted his constancy; in his openly joining fellowship with the enemies of the Lord; in his presumptuously rushing into needless peril; in his adding cursing to lying, contempt of Christ to his denial of Him. The wound to the Lord's heart we cannot guess, whose notions of the sinfulness of sin, and of the tenderness of the Saviour's love, are so poor and shallow. The scandal to the Church has never ceased from that hour to this.

Lastly, let us consider his Repentance, which I will first give you in the inspired words: "Immediately, while he yet spake the cock crew. And the Lord turned and looked upon Peter. And Peter remembered the words of the Lord; and he went out and wept bitterly." "And when he thought thereon, he wept."

Rightly to estimate this repentance, we must glance at the *causes* of it, the *signs* of it, the *continuance* of it, and the *genuineness* of it. The *causes* of it. It was the cock crowing that recalled him to himself; it was the look of

Christ that restored him to the Saviour. As has been well said, "An awakener of some kind or other is appointed to every man." Some are brought back by the sound of village bells; some softened by the strains of music heard and loved in the days of innocence. An open grave, or the news of a friend's death, or a letter, or a look, or silence, are among the various methods by which the love of God draws to Himself the hearts of His elect. And so the cock crowing made Peter think; but the Lord's look made him love. There fell on his abashed and stricken soul the full gaze of the Saviour. Can you picture to yourself the glance of that eye? You cannot. We have never seen Christ in the flesh. We know not, and no genius in the world can paint for us, the marvellous countenance of the Incarnate Son. Bound with cords, condemned, fresh from the buffeting, coming forth from the hall into the courtyard, to be sent to Pilate, then to Herod, then to Pilate, then to His cross, the Lamb of God was not so overwhelmed with His own sorrows that He could not feel for His apostle's misery; and He looked on him with pained surprise, with holy anger, with calm majesty, with yearning love. He, of whom the sinner says, "I shall perish at His presence;" He, before whose face the heavens and earth shall flee away; Whose eyes are a flame of fire, and Whose Countenance is as the sun shining in his strength—to Peter was not the Judge, but the Spouse: "His eyes were as the eyes of doves by the rivers of water, washed with milk, and fitly set." That look saved Peter from the fate of Judas.

"That gracious chiding look, Thy call
To win him to himself and Thee,
Sweetening the sorrow of his fall,
Which else were ru'd too bitterly."

He wept. No small sign of repentance that! Tears are not so cheap with men. Most men will do anything rather than shed them. Ah, my brethren, what that grief must have been, who shall say? Let us not rudely look

into it, but leave him in his sorrow with his pitiful Lord. Again, his repentance was not a transient thing. "When he thought thereon, he wept." Tradition tells us that the Apostle never afterwards heard a cock crow without shedding tears. In the text we have the authority of St. Peter himself for stating that his sin never came up before his memory without renewing his repentance. How genuine it was his whole after-life will shew us. Is it not the greatest penitence to carry our present cross just as God sends it? to do each day and each hour, notwithstanding our own repugnance and weariness, His will rather than our own? Learn this here. Behold the Apostle hastening to the tomb of the risen Lord; uniting in fellowship with the other apostles; plunging into the sea to meet the Lord, who on His resurrection-day had forgiven him; passionately appealing to the Lord in those words which all Christ's people love to use after him—"Lord, Thou knowest all things, Thou knowest that I love Thee;" living to Him and dying to Him in all the chequered history of his future life; and at last, in the touching humility of his great and noble soul, determined, if he were permitted to drink the cup of his Christ, he would be crucified, not as his Lord was, but with his head downwards. My brethren, if he be an instance of human frailty in his fall, he is also a noble monument of Divine grace in his restored and completed integrity: and, with Mary Magdalene, he may shew the timid hearts of all whom God hath touched for sin, that there is no height of saintliness forfeited to the penitent.

And now, in a few concluding words, suffer me to gather up for you some of the great lessons this narrative contains, and to open out to you the precepts and verities that lie enshrined here for us, the "heirs of all the ages."

Remember, this sin of Peter is not as a single and monstrous phenomenon, happening but once and for ever; but that the history of the Cross, in which this is but an indi-

vidual act, is in the hearts and minds of sinners repeated daily. The Lord Jesus is daily nailed to His Cross. Daily is He betrayed for thirty pieces of silver; daily is He denied by Peter, and surrendered to Pilate, and mocked by Herod, and slain by the world.

“To hate is to slay:” and sin rests in the will; and though the Lord is not on earth, His Church is; and this greatest of crimes is incorporated in the very nature of humanity. Could that Holy Life be lived over again, even to fifty times, it would ever have the same ghastly ending in the Cross and Passion. It is no idle warning to us, “that we crucify not the Son of God afresh, nor put Him to an open shame.” And the question of questions is, On whose side are ye? For, O men and brethren, ye must be on the one or the other; ye must be either consenting to His death, and casting lots on His raiment, or, with the Virgin and St. John, weeping for Him under His Cross. Every single act we do, with a moral complexion to it, either confesses or denies Him. “He that is not with Me is against Me: and he that gathereth not with Me scattereth.”

Yes, wherever we are—in our quiet home-life, in our smooth conventional life, in the market-place, aye, even in this House of God, we are ever either saying, “So let Thine enemies perish, O Lord,” or hoarsely shouting out “Crucify Him, crucify Him.” But which is it? For recollect again, that though we have all denied with St. Peter’s denial, we have not all repented with his repentance. You have wandered with him—have you wept with him? Has your whole life since you found out that you betrayed and crucified Him (if you have found it out) been like his, a devout and loyal service? We who wonder at St. Peter, had better ten times over wonder at ourselves. His denial of the Lord lasted but an hour; ours may have lasted a life.

But it may be, that as you have followed Peter in his sin,

so you have imitated him in his repentance: that such were some of you; but ye are washed, ye are justified, ye are sanctified in the Name of the Lord Jesus, and by the Spirit of our God. Then, be "living epistles, to be known and read of all men." No one who saw St. Peter after his repentance could doubt his sorrow: let no one who sees you doubt yours. Not from your talking about it, not from your visible tears; but from your life. "Christianity, to the bulk of men, is a book written in a foreign tongue;" and you who are Christians are its translation. From your life they will judge of the religion you profess; and according to the men you are, you will be either a scandal or a blessing. O you who are in Christ, if you but knew your power; O if you who mourn over the little that you do, and that you love, could but first see what are your possibilities of usefulness, and then by faith in God rise and enter into them, the face of the world would be changed. Finally, remember that courage comes from love, and that the foot of the Cross is the safest place for you. "Impetuous nature thinks and speaks much; grace speaks and thinks little, because it is simple, peaceable, and gathered up into itself." Religious feeling is not an end, but a mean to an end; not to be sought and rested in for itself, but to be instantly used as a help to action. Nay, the very noblest human sentiments, without the presence of Christ, will be no help to you in the hour of trial. The recollection of past steadfastness, the murmur of past prayers, will be as stubble before fire in the face of the tempter, unless you have committed yourselves to Him who "walketh in the midst of the seven golden candlesticks," and in the hollow of whose hand His people be. O ye who are "called to be saints," cling to Christ. Rest, and love to rest, under the gaze of His sleepless eye. It looks you through and through; but it is a brother's eye, and it consumes not. While it looks at you it loves you, for you are

“complete in Him.” Are you weak? then ask Him to pray for you. He prayed for Peter. When you stumble, rise up again: and in humility and faith strengthen your brethren. For if you will but cling to Him, He will preserve you from “the stormy wind and tempest,” and “no man shall pluck you out of the Father’s hand.”

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SERMON XX.

THE PENITENT THIEF.

BY

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THE PENITENT THIEF.

A SERMON,

PREACHED IN

THE CHURCH OF ST. MARY-THE-VIRGIN,
OXFORD,

ON WEDNESDAY, MARCH 31, 1858.

BY

THOMAS LEGH CLAUGHTON, M.A.,

HONORARY CANON OF WORCESTER, AND VICAR OF KIDDERMINSTER.

OXFORD,

AND 377, STRAND, LONDON:

JOHN HENRY AND JAMES PARKER.

M DCCC LVIII.



A SERMON,

&c.

LUKE xxiii. 42.

“And he said unto Jesus, Lord, remember me when Thou comest into Thy kingdom.”

WITHOUT this prayer, the testimony of Scripture to the converting power of the Cross would not have been complete. Its remedial effect upon the heart was more fully exemplified by this petition than by any other instance in which it is recorded to have softened, or taught, or transformed a soul. Within how short a space had this same malefactor reviled the blessed Jesus,—if, at least, we are to believe with the older fathers that he, as well as his companion, took up the cry of the standers by—“If Thou be the Son of God, come down from the cross.” But even if it should not be so, if thoughts of Christ’s possible greatness and glory had been passing through the mind of this man during his imprisonment, or if, while he was yet at liberty, going to and fro in Jerusalem, he had heard or seen anything which had struck his guilty soul with awe and compunction, what can explain so great maturity of conviction, attained under such circumstances, but that power of the Cross of which our Lord spake, when He said, “I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto Me?” For, first, so soon as any motion of repentance had stirred the depths of his own soul, this poor suffering wretch had done what he could to reprove his fellow-sufferer for his hardness

and impenitence : "Dost thou not fear God, seeing thou art in the same condemnation?" Likewise, he had confessed their common guilt : "We indeed justly ; for we receive the due reward of our deeds." And he had acknowledged the majesty of innocence in Christ : "This man hath done nothing amiss." And now he professed belief in His kingly power, in the spiritual nature of His kingdom, and, as though he had heard that "faithful saying, and worthy of all men to be received, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners," begged for himself, sinner as he was and abject, to be remembered, in the day of His power, by One who was now like himself, "a very scorn of men, and the outcast of the people." Whence came this faith, and hope, and love, than which the greatest saints could have expressed or shewn no greater—yea, the very apostles themselves at that time fell far short of it—Whence came this, but from the Cross? Was not this the beginning of that triumph over the principalities and powers of darkness, concerning which St. Paul saith, "He made a show of them openly, triumphing over them in it," i. e. in His Cross?

Flushed with his recent victory over the caitiff Judas, Satan, it may be, forgot how the strong man should soon be bound, and his house spoiled by a power surpassing his strength or device to resist. He thought not that the first trophy of his overthrow would be in the person of a condemned thief, who, when apparently past hope, should not only himself be converted by this spectacle, which he had been busily preparing for far different ends, but should also be a beacon of hope, a strong preservative against despair for ever afterwards, to sinners hanging over the very abyss of destruction ; insomuch that wherever the Gospel should be preached in all the world, the record of that thief's repentance and conversion should fan the expiring embers of faith and hope in breasts which but for this must have been

sunk in the blackness of darkness for ever! What was it that so turned the man's thoughts out of the channels of lifelong impurity, dishonesty, and violence, and blasphemy? Why, it was the very excess of persecution which Satan, in the impotence of his malice, had raised against the Blessed One! Herod's soldiers had done their work too well: that crown of thorns, so fiercely thrust into His temples, contrasted too marvellously with the mildness of His aspect, and His gentle, loving words. He looked a King,—albeit His kingdom was not, could not be, of this world! His kingdom must be far hence—far from this scene of conflict, and hatred, and brutality! in some unknown, unheard of region, where there is neither death, nor sorrow, nor crying, nor pain! where the wolf and the lamb do feed together, and the lion doth eat straw like the ox! Stay; did not an ancient word of prophecy, that his father or his mother had taught him in his childhood, recur to the confused mind of the suffering malefactor, concerning a holy mountain where they should not hurt nor destroy; within whose borders violence and wasting should be heard no more,—concerning a city whose walls were salvation, and whose gates, praise. He looked again at the agonized yet serene countenance of the crucified King: he beheld the superscription written over; he heard the blasphemy of the multitude. Again the recollections of his childhood, and whatever religious impressions he had ever felt, rushed back upon his soul: "Can this indeed be the King my nation was taught to look for? Can this Man of sorrows, this despised and rejected one, be He?" These thoughts issued in the prayer we are considering to-night: "Lord, think of me when Thou comest into Thy kingdom!" Think of thee? aye, thou poor thief! "Verily, I say unto thee, To-day shalt thou be with Me in paradise."

Aye, brethren, did the word *paradise* correspond with

thoughts in the dying malefactor's breast which the Lord knew him to be cherishing, so as to confirm his hope, and perfect in the short space which yet remained of life and thought, the faith new planted there? The darkness which supervened almost as soon as this word of promise was spoken, and continued thick and terrible for three hours, might have been designed by Him who ordained it for the special humiliation and abasement of this sinful soul. He was, as it were, in the belly of hell, suffering God's terrors for his sins, which were now set in array before him. Fearfulness and trembling were come upon him, and a horrible dread had overwhelmed him, to think what he had done, and how utterly unworthy he was of the goodness which seemed to be compassing him about. And how mysterious, yea, dark and impenetrable as the overhanging cloud, must have been goodness, at such a time, from such a source, to such a man as he had been!

The darkness passing away at the ninth hour revealed again to his eyes the great Sufferer; and just then the silence was suddenly broken by that loud and piercing cry, "My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?" He heard it, and no doubt—of this there can be doubt—as he heard it, he felt drawn yet closer unto the new Lord of his heart, by the cords of a man and by bonds of love, through their common humanity! The work of conversion was going on rapidly; this was an exception to all rule. In general, "the kingdom of God is as if a man should cast seed into the ground, and should sleep and rise night and day, and the seed should spring and grow up, he knoweth not how." But this work the Lord hastened in His time. The fellowship of his Master's sufferings prevented days and nights in this man's spiritual growth. He above all that ever were born, or shall be, "being made perfect in a short time, fulfilled a long time."

And now the work which the Cross, and the Cross alone, had begun, was about to be perfected by the Cross. The strength of the blessed Jesus was dried up like a potsherd. His tongue clave to His gums. All His bones were out of joint. His heart in the midst of His Body was even like melting wax. God was bringing Him into the dust of death. Fierce dogs had compassed Him. The assembly of the wicked had enclosed Him quite. His own familiar friends could probably bear the sight no longer. He looked for some to have pity, but there was none; and for comforters, but found none. But from that almost expiring body—from that loving heart, broken as it was with the rebukes of God for sin, just then came forth that utterance on which all ages since, and yet to come, have pondered and shall ponder, wherever the record of it shall enter into their ears—"It is finished." And having thus said, He cried with a loud voice as a conqueror, "Father, into Thy hands I commend My Spirit,"—and gave up the Ghost.

But if ages have pondered this voice, what must it have been to him who *heard* it—to whom it was the sign of redemption accomplished, of the near-at-hand fulfilment of the promise just given, "To-day shalt thou be with Me in paradise!" For it was not the voice of one powerless in death. He that had strength thus to cry out in dying, must have had some inner source of power which men knew not of! When the centurion who had oversight of the execution saw that He so cried out and gave up the ghost, he said, "Truly this man was the Son of God!" And altogether He seemed to commend His Spirit unto God at His own time, insomuch that when Pilate heard of it he marvelled, and again asked the officer who brought the report, how long He had been dead? Now that which so attracted the notice of others must have been to the new convert, who was looking unto Jesus with such intensity of faith and love, as the very open-

ing of the gates of paradise. Welcome the last indignity and cruelty which those savage executioners shall wreak on his mangled body, so it hasten his reunion with Him, with whose baptism of suffering he was being baptized. For the spirit of martyrdom had entered into the heart of the expiring malefactor. He could have died *for* Him *with* whom it was his privilege to die, and dying, to have this hope—that he should be glorified together with Him, as He had promised. With great faith had come great love, and hope being joined thereto, here was that “threefold cord which is not quickly broken.” God, that began the work, did in this case cut it short in righteousness. Perhaps the very first words uttered by our blessed Lord upon the Cross, when His murderers were nailing His hands and feet to the accursed tree, “Father, forgive them; they know not what they do;”—perhaps these words—being foreign to the principles and feelings by which the thief had ever seen men actuated—made the first impression upon this hard, impenitent heart. “Who is this,” he may have thought within himself, “that gives blessing for cursing, and repayeth injury with love?” And when he beheld in Him who thus spake such divine patience, and courage, and fortitude—such manifest tokens of strength and power in the midst of prevailing weakness—these first impressions ripened rapidly into solid convictions. Sensations which he had never before experienced took possession of his soul. He felt the breathings of God’s Spirit within him; and the tears of repentance flowed forth freely, as we read it this day in the Psalm: “He sendeth out His word and melteth them: He bloweth with His wind, and the waters flow.”

There is no room in the history of mankind for another such conversion. There could be no other such victory of faith, no other such triumph of the Cross. Here was no light from heaven above the brightness of the midday sun,

no voice as of a trumpet sounding in the ears, no appeal by name to the person assuring him of some gracious design which God entertained towards him, no expostulation bringing his past sin to remembrance, and reminding him of a warfare within, which conscience had long waged with the passion that absorbed his soul. "Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou Me? It is hard for thee to kick against the pricks." On the contrary, it was the hour of evil men, and the power of darkness. The prince of this world was in the ascendant. There was no sign of his approaching downfall. Every token was a token of wrath, and malice, and hatred, and revenge, and cruelty—save only the love which shone forth in the blessed Jesus, and which shining in upon the dreary darkness of one soul, already past hope, as it seemed, and condemned to the pit, effected its conversion, and rescued it from everlasting woe!

Now he who goes about to establish upon this basis the efficacy of what is called a death-bed repentance in general, would clearly build a very broad superstructure upon a narrow and insufficient foundation. For there is no evidence, not the least, that this man had ever heard of Christ, or in any way disregarded Him after such warning as most of those who put off repentance to the bed of sickness and of death have received during their lifetime. The utmost we could hope, or reasonably build upon the acceptance of the penitent thief, would be, that if indeed one had never heard or realized to himself the sufferings of Jesus Christ for sin, and should have the rare privilege of seeing in this case how they were applied to the conscience, even at the last, and being applied, were effectual under such marvellous and unusual circumstances, (circumstances which can never occur again,) to the justification of a sinful soul: if a dying heathen, for instance, could be made aware then, for the first time, of the doctrine of faith and repentance, and be taught by this

example, that "though we have sinned, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the Righteous, and that He is the propitiation for our sins; and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world,"—in that case, the record of the conversion of the penitent thief upon the cross would have a legitimate and most comforting application. But that which is chiefly to be gathered from the record is the sovereign efficacy of the one grand remedy for all the diseases of our souls—the Cross of Christ; seeing that it availed in the most hopeless case that ever occurred or can occur; seeing that the spectacle which the Cross exhibited of self-emptying, or by whatever word we can express the most entire abnegation of self, or self-abasement, which is to any mind conceivable; seeing, I say, that this spectacle of self-abasement, gentleness, meekness, patience, love, tenderness, extreme considerateness, mercifulness, endurance of hardness—words fail us to express all the virtue and all the loveliness that shone forth in the crucifixion of the blessed Jesus—but that it was effectual to convert a heart so hard, that no other conceivable power could have touched it—the lesson which the dying malefactor bequeathed to mankind was this: "By grace ye are saved, through faith, and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God."

It worketh in a manner wholly inscrutable, wholly unaccountable, as it did in this case. One was taken, the other left. Both were in the same condemnation; both (it is probable, though not certain,) exhibited the same impenitence and hardness of heart. It is idle to conjecture previous impressions, early preparations. They will not solve the difficulty; they will only carry the mystery into depths on which the light of revelation has not shined, as it has on these. Let us walk where we are sure, and confess that the Cross of Jesus Christ wrought a miracle—I do not say of mercy so much as of power—at which all ages shall marvel; which,

when days and years shall cease, when the everlasting choir shall praise the Lord in holy songs of joy, shall still be hymned and hymned again; and the spirit of him that was saved—that crucified malefactor—ever rejoice, with increasing and enlarging consciousness of the glory of such ineffable salvation, in the worthiness of the Lamb that was slain to receive power, and riches, and wisdom, and strength, and honour, and glory, and blessing.

Is there in all this assembly one heart which, having meditated in truth and earnestness on all or any of those great lessons which have lately been delivered in this place,—having conceived more definitely than ever before what the necessity and what the nature of repentance is—is melted by the fire of the Word, or stirred by the breath of the Spirit, let him pour forth this earnest humble prayer to-night, “Lord! remember me when Thou comest into Thy kingdom.” No qualification needed for such a prayer, save only sincerity in the desire, faith in the power and love of the King that reigneth and shall reign! You may receive, as the dying penitent received, exceeding abundantly above all that you ask or think! Or is there here one on whose heart not one of the exhortations he has heard has made a serious, deep, or lasting impression; who has gone to hear the Word in the spirit of some in Ezekiel’s time, who said rather lightly one to another, “Come, I pray you, and hear what is the word that cometh forth?” or who has gone, not lightly, but because others went, or wishing to stand well with serious men? or who has gone hardly and critically, distrusting this or that preacher?—let such a one forget himself, the preacher, his companions, tear himself away from every earthly association and influence, and endeavour to realise the power of the crucifixion of the blessed Jesus on the heart of an habitual evil liver, then for the first time brought in contact with incarnate Deity—then for the first

time feeling a participation with the suffering humanity of the Son of God—then for the first time recalling the past in its real connection with the interminable future ; taught during those three hours of silence and darkness things which a lifetime had not sufficed to bring within the range of his apprehension ; learning by the sufferings of Christ somewhat of that love which passeth knowledge, which shall be the glory of His saints for ever. Let such a one come near and understand the marvellous virtue of the Cross. Let him ponder it this night in its length, and depth, and breadth, and height ; how, in regard of duration, it stretcheth far back into the ever-lengthening vistas of the remotest eternity, having been ordained before the worlds by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God ; in regard of wideness—how, having embraced in its scope all ages and generations of mankind, it hath come down to us also ; so that if we were to take the wings of the morning, if we were able to fly as swift as light, which in an instant overruns the whole horizon, and carries day to the most distant regions of the world, even there we should find the same Power which sustained the dying malefactor, upholding all things. And then, how deep it is, as saith the Psalmist : “ If I make my bed in hell, Thou art there ! ” how high,—“ If I ascend to heaven, Thou art there also ! ” Oh ! why does any doubt ever perplex our souls ? It is because we attempt to measure infinite compassion by the finite compass of our understanding. It is because we set our sins in the balance against God’s love, when the Apostle has so plainly taught us, that though our sins are indeed more in number than the hairs of our head, and our hearts fail us because of them, yet this abounding iniquity is covered by superabounding grace, that as sin had reigned unto death, even so might grace reign through righteousness unto eternal life by Jesus Christ our Lord.

And we, my brethren, to whom the handling of these mysteries of life and salvation is committed for our brethren's sake,—we, to whom it is entrusted to preach the Word of God to the people, to give to every man his portion of meat in due season, have need to be careful lest we handle such things deceitfully, or with any aim but the one single aim to convert souls to God by the power of the Cross, and to build them up and edify them by the same. “He that hath my word,” saith the Prophet Jeremy, “let him preach my word faithfully;” i. e. let him be careful not to suffer the imaginations of his own heart to mislead him in the application, as some in Jeremiah's time stole God's words every one from his neighbour; gathered here and there some ideas that might be striking and beautiful, so as to excite a pleasurable sensation in the hearer, but which might have the effect in the end of making the heart of the righteous sad, whom God had not made sad, or of strengthening the hands of the wicked by promising him life, because they were not delivered to the people according to the true proportion of faith: a snare which, it is needless to say, doth much beset the preachers of God's Word in this very age and nation, and which, unless we watch unto prayer, will draw us off from our true and only object, which is by the preaching of the Cross to endeavour to turn men from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan unto God.

Provided we keep this in view, we need not fear the insinuations of the careless and indifferent, that no good is done by these efforts to stir up the people. It is amazing and incredible with what coldness men do stand by and look on, and speak one to another about the preaching of the Gospel in their streets, apparently without at all recollecting that to *them* is the Word of His salvation sent; that this call may be the last that God will ever vouchsafe to *them*; that because *they* have hitherto neglected all ordinary opportu-

nities and means of grace, He has once more sent His servants to compel them, as it were, to come in. But provided, I say, we go forth to our work and our labour determined to know nothing among those to whom we are sent but Jesus Christ and Him crucified, we need neither be disheartened by their indifference, nor yet by the shameful imputations that have been cast upon these very efforts in some quarters, that they are purposely designed to narrow, and limit, and circumscribe the fulness and the free revelation of the glorious Gospel of our God. If such, indeed, should be the effect of this or any other discourse you have heard in this place, you will do well to prove your own selves, and to pray God for the help of His Holy Spirit, to aid you in searching your hearts, as David prayed in the 139th Psalm: "Search me, O God, and know my heart. Try me, and know my thoughts; and see if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting." But if our words have comforted you, or reproved some evil thing in any of you, or stirred you up to fresh zeal and love toward God and His Christ, and to greater constancy and fervour in prayer,—then, brethren, be not shaken in mind, or be troubled, neither by spirit nor by word, as that the word of the Gospel hath been spoken in vain: but gird up the loins of your mind; be sober; and hope to the end for the grace that is to be brought unto you at the revelation of Jesus Christ.



